



**From Modernism to  
Postmodernism**

**Concepts and Strategies  
of Postmodern  
American Fiction**

**Gerhard Hoffmann**

Postmodern Studies 38

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Hans Bertens

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## 1. Introduction: Methods of Approach

Modernism and postmodernism will in this text be viewed in terms of continuity and discontinuity. The experimental tendencies in postmodern art are interpreted against the backdrop of the overall cultural and social context, which creates both the intellectual climate and the material conditions for making of art. Postmodernism is a complex phenomenon. It is a product of the Sixties, but not their sum. The Sixties are a composite of contradictory trends, as is postmodernism. This explosive decade may create what Susan Sontag called a new “unitary sensibility”; however, the new sensibility is not uniform but plural. Like the Sixties, postmodernism is diverse: it extends into the culture at large, it defines the theories that explain the condition of the lifeworld and the arts, and it is responsible for the innovative power of the creative arts. Each of these three areas of postmodernism has its own “rationality complex” (Habermas); each highlights different attributes of the Sixties; each extends beyond the Sixties and develops its own perspective(s). The rationalities of the three (or more) aspects of postmodernism connect and form a unity within multiplicity. The postmodernism of the Sixties is the result of the liberation from the restraints of the Fifties. It extends into the past and the future. The Sixties turned against what was conceived as the general mood and the dominant notes of the Fifties: materialism, moralism, individualism, self-consciousness, domesticity, and privacy, de-politicization, anxiety, the Cold War and the Bomb; they rejected the methods of manipulation and what Marcuse called “surplus repression”, the blacklists and union purges, and above all the pervading spirit of hypocrisy. It was a spirit of deconstruction that prevailed; its complement, the spirit of reconstruction, was less sure in its goals. Postmodernism participated in this dialectic of deconstruction and reconstruction, as did postmodern fiction; both, however, did so in their own, quite different ways. The changes, of course, did not come overnight; the ground for the shift was prepared in the Fifties. The first postmodern novels were written in the Fifties as were the first rebellious statements.

Postmodernism is not only a national phenomenon. Since it is not just a fashionable cult but a far-reaching reordering and revaluation not only of art, music and literature, but of the very notions of what culture and civilization are, should be and can be, it spreads across the western civilizations, though of course in different ways and degrees. America is the center of these movements, culturally and artistically, but the theories of deconstruction that accompany the advance of postmodernism are mostly of European origin. The development of postmodernism seen from the vantage point of the end of the century shows how alive it was with possibility but also how contradictory its features were. It had the status of a new paradigm, quite similar to that which Thomas Kuhn has described for revolutionary change in the sciences. Beginning with the critique of the Fifties and modernism, it broadens into a sensibility and mode of writing, is then interpreted as a general cultural phenomenon and dominates the cultural scene for twenty-five to thirty years before exhausting itself. Postmodern art grows out of and participates in the new postmodern spirit but it also has its own rationale as a language of art. Its rebellion against the rigid art ideology of modernism creates a new mode of experience, a new consciousness, a new intellectual style and, above all, new playful possibilities for the imagination unhampered by the frustrations of existential alienation and the over-serious devotion to awareness, which did not allow fiction a significant variation of perspectives after modernism reached its peak, which thereby limited the range of innovation. At the same time, the radical experimentalism of postmodern art is a continuation of the modern focus on form, even *ex negativo* in the experiments with anti-form, so that one should speak, as already mentioned, of both continuity and discontinuity between the two. The double-directedness of art towards both the general trends of the cultural scene and its own art tradition puts the concepts and practices of the arts in a position in-between two influences. This means that postmodern fiction, though it grows out of the spirit of the Sixties, is by no means only the reflection of the specificities of the Sixties or its postmodernist credos. Though it is that too, it is also critical and subversive, following its age-old function to mark the deficits of the time.

The present study concerns itself with postmodern American writers. Yet it has to take account of the fact that although American

postmodern fiction is a national narrative, it is at the same time post-national or, rather, “transnational”, and pursues a “politics of non-identity” (Posnock 34), and is in fact participating in, even dominating a (perhaps last) cosmopolitan phase in the arts that resembles also in its cosmopolitanism the trends of modernism. For this reason it will be necessary to refer in the course of the argument to writers outside the United States who were important to American narrative, writers such as Beckett, Borges, Márquez, Nabokov, but also Joyce, Kafka, and others. Of central interest will be the American authors who by common consent are seen to occupy the center of American postmodern fiction, i.e., in alphabetical order, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Raymond Federman, William Gaddis, John Hawkes, Jerzy Kosinski, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Ronald Sukenick, and Kurt Vonnegut. Reference will also be made to other postmodern writers, such as Apple, Burroughs, Davenport, Heller, McElroy, or Wurlizer, as well as to some of those writers who have been strongly influenced by postmodern strategies, like Adler, Auster, Doctorow, DeLillo, Didion, or Purdy. The focus on the highly experimental phase of the 1960s and 1970s is an attempt to be as inclusive as possible and as precise as necessary. Still, whenever earlier or later works of the prominent writers of the Sixties and Seventies offer further knowledge or confirm the main trends in an important way we will include them in our argument. Examples of such are Hawkes’s *The Cannibal* (1949), and Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* (1955), or Gass’s *The Tunnel* (which was begun and started to appear in portions in the Sixties and was published as a whole in 1995), as well as Coover’s *John’s Wife* (1996) and *Briar Rose* (1996), Barth’s *On with the Story* (1996), Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), or Gass’s *Cartesian Sonata and Other Stories* (1998). The concentration on the two decades when American postmodern narrative can be said to have dominated experimental literature in the US will, hopefully, minimize the danger of overgeneralization and will allow concrete analysis of the narrative concepts and strategies that direct the American postmodern matrix of narrative possibilities.

Postmodern fiction is here understood as a very serious, sometimes desperate, but also playful attempt to cope with the accumulated dubieties, insecurities, vagaries and skepticisms of our time. It does this by creating a montaged confusion of discourses and



realms, of presence and absence, by producing a field of intersections where expiring and evolving ideas and strategies meet, and by seeking in the remaking of the world and the fusion of design and debris the liberating source of the imaginary. It struggles in the face of the recognized reign of the void and the gap and death, which gives fiction an additional existential dimension. Our study will relate the narrative texts to the traditions and conventions of fiction, to the cultural and social context from which they draw, and to the other arts where it is feasible. The analysis of postmodern narrative is here concerned with the imaginary worlds of fiction, the concepts on which they are based, and the perspectives and strategies used for their creation. These worlds are situation-oriented: they have a “local” quality that is shared by epistemological and ethical structures. Pluralism and a multiplicity of perspectives change the relations of dominance in a spirit of liberation, a sense of joy at being released from stifling traditions and ideologies. The field of experience dominates over the experiencing subject, and this field is constructed as surface without redeeming depth, except for the looming void. The singular situations and sequences of situations are arranged in terms of disparity and incoherence. The succession of situations and constellations departs from what might be considered a “good” sequentiality, together with the bonds of uni-vocal causality and logic. The upshot of these developments is what we will later call “situationalism”, a situational —not a totalizing or historicizing—orientation, not only in fiction but also in the culture at large, a stance which is directed towards presentism, eclecticism and fragmentation. These tendencies serve in fiction the double purpose of deconstructing what is clichéd and used up and of exuberantly reconstructing the new imaginary worlds under the reign of play, irony, and the comic mode, which serve to create a plurality of viewpoints. Situationalism and its connotations will be an important starting point for the analysis of the deconstruction of the basic narrative unit, the situation, into fragments and its reconstruction by montage and collage, and the multiplication of the story.

There are *maximalist* and *minimalist* forms of postmodern fiction. We will take note of both the similarities and the differences between these artistic approaches to the common postmodern literary and cultural condition. The creative “excess” of Barth, Pynchon, McElroy, and others, continues the maximalist tradition of Herman

Melville, Henry James, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner. Barthelme's short fictions of the Sixties and Seventies exemplify, on the one hand, the continuation and radicalization of the aesthetic minimalism in the tradition of Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway (see also Raymond Carver, Brautigan, Hawkes, and others) but, on the other, the danger of repetitiveness in the second part of the Seventies. It is evident in both artistic approaches that, as Vattimo notes, postmodernism demonstrates its own doubts in its ability to overcome critically, and progress definitely, beyond modernism and to disentangle itself from representation and the demands of the good continuity of form (1988, 164-171). In fact, most of both the "putter-inners" and the "leaver-outers" among the experimental writers — terms created by Thomas Wolfe (643) when he defended himself against Fitzgerald's criticism of his maximalism of detail and applied by Sukenick and Elkin to postmodern fiction<sup>1</sup> — returned to the more linear, coherent and "realistic" forms of narrative in their texts of the eighties and nineties, even though, as Baudrillard claims, "the real is no longer what it used to be" (1988b, 171).

When approaching these texts, one can of course choose quite different perspectives. If it is true that "there is a sense in which narratology has only ever had two categories to work with" and that "[w]e might loosely term them the anthropological and textual", this book attempts to bridge the gap between the two, between "the represented and the linguistic, the human and the material, world and structure, even signified and signifier and content and form" (Gibson 236). The workings of the imagination, in postmodern fiction as elsewhere, follow and express the anthropological equipment of humans. Among the many there are two crucial but decisively different approaches to postmodern American fiction. The great weight given in postmodern narrative to reflexivity and self-reflexivity, to the preoccupation with art, its rules and failures, its fictionality inside and outside the text<sup>2</sup> has initiated a critical approach that focuses on what has been called "meta-fiction", the textual reflection on its own status, the recurrence to and disruption of the literary tradition and the conventions of the novel, and the recast and reformulation of what is known of the figures and events of "real" history. Emphasizing the latter point, Linda Hutcheon speaks of "historiographic meta-fiction" (1988), which includes a

whole range of works like E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, Coover's *The Public Burning*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* or Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, and excludes others that do not refer to the "real" historical world.

The fantastication and imaginary transformation of "worlds" in postmodern fiction, on the other hand, has induced Brian McHale to suggest that, though there is continuity between modernism and postmodernism (which also Hutcheon recognizes), the dominant concerns have changed from epistemological to ontological ones. While the modern writers were occupied with epistemological questions —questions directed towards the truth of knowledge, the problems of identity, and the existential anxieties provoked by doubt, disillusionment and the quest for meaning —the ontological pre-occupation of postmodern fiction is concerned not so much with truth, but with being and the existence of autonomous worlds (which of course reflect a fictional truth). McHale recognizes that the difference between epistemological and ontological concerns are only gradual, since questions of the comprehensibility of the world and the self precede and are always implied in ontological questions. But with the ontological dominant he sees a shift in emphasis towards questions like: "What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" (10).

If these are the problems that postmodern fiction is concerned with, then they are of course also the questions that a critical examination of postmodern fiction must ask. This book attempts to contribute to the answer of such questions as "What kinds of worlds are there?" Though the postmodern fictional worlds are obviously "fantastic", the problem is, what is fantastic, and how are such worlds built? Being indeed worlds, they apparently are constructed as such, i.e., by forming situations and sequences of situations. They share components like space, time, characters, actions or events with the "real" world and "realistic" fiction, even though they are all marked by the deconstructive turn and, after the breakdown of representational schemes, are used to playfully reconstruct new worlds out of old ones.

Before we then turn to the analysis of the postmodern fictional worlds, their modes of construction and evaluation, the

following chapter serves as an introduction into the general problems of both postmodernism and postmodern fiction. We shall discuss the multifariousness of *conceptualizations* of the postmodern; the multiplication of the post-phenomena; the three areas of postmodernism — the culture at large, theory, and the arts; the fundamental aspects of postmodernism — the postmodern era, the postmodern historical strand, and postmodernism as an anthropological constant, a deconstructive sensibility; furthermore, the inclusive and the exclusive definitions, the changes and contradictions in the concepts of postmodernism. Postmodern *aesthetics* will be considered under the aspects of art as well as the environment, the culture at large as well as aesthetics of art and cultural aesthetics. A third dimension of aesthetics is what one might call the aesthetic attitude: it is abstracted from the aesthetic experience and becomes transferable to all areas of life and thought; it is characterized by the acknowledgment of multiplicity and otherness and tolerance. Where feasible, verbal art will be compared with visual art; both are related to the traditions of their art disciplines, to the cultural environment and the popular and commercial culture, as well as to the aesthetic attitude in general.

Since the totalizing features of narrative — character, plot, theme — have been deconstructed, and the narrated *situation* has become the basis of the fictional argument, we shall consign the third chapter to a discussion of the concepts of “situation” and “situationalism” in culture, in psychology, sociology, the visual arts, and especially in narrative, where character struggles in vain with situation. The narrated situation with (at least) four constitutive elements is regarded the smallest narrative unit in fiction. Consequently, narrative is seen to be the situational transformation of meaning. The elements of the situation are space and time (the natural frame), and character and action (the social frame). They are always “there”, even if they are not filled with details, and appear “under erasure” (Derrida), as a “minus function” (Lotman), since they define and compose the situation. Composition and perspective create the profile of the narrated situation and are thus the basic agents of form in fiction. This basic narrative form is invaded by force, which makes for the fundamental conflict between construction and deconstruction, deconstruction and reconstruction,

or, in other words, between order and chaos, stability and fluidity in postmodern fiction.

The analysis of “situationalism” in culture and thought and of the structure of the narrated situation and its shape in postmodern fiction is followed by a consideration under two aspects of the deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning in postmodern fiction. One is innertextual and has been important for the development of the novel since the eighteenth century: the *symbolic method*. The reason for using the symbolic method of signification in postmodern fiction is the same as it was for romantic, “realistic”, and modern fiction: to fill gaps of knowledge that cannot be filled by rational explanatory — with the difference, however, that now the gaps have widened to include the void, and that the suggestions of symbolic meaning have increased in uncertainty to a point that meaning becomes diffused and includes chaos and that not the inherent meaning of the symbolic vehicle but the willfully improved perspective reigns absolute. The other aspect of meaning-building is intertextual, in which the relationship between postmodern American fiction and trends in philosophy, psychology, and language theory will be analyzed. The links between fiction and philosophy will be considered in terms of antagonism, complementarity, disjunction, and mutual subversion. This will entail a discussion of language theory, existentialism, the absurd, and the formal principle of the *paradox*, and their combined influence on postmodern narrative strategies. This gives rise to the discussion of what has been called the basic condition of postmodern fiction, the *fantastic*, its meaning in psychology, sociology and the arts. The investigation of the fantastic as attitude and aesthetic category in its various forms, also as magic realism, leads to a first overview of the formal *strategies of disruption* in postmodern fiction.

The *elements of the situation* — space, time, character and action/event — will supply the parameters for the further analysis of postmodern fiction. These elements have their own continuities, and they establish different relations of dominance within the situation and in the sequence of situations. Their representation or non-representation, as well as their fantastic transformation, tell us something about the characteristics of the created worlds and their meaning or refusal of meaning. As mentioned, time and space form the “natural” frame of the situation, while character and action/event

form the social one. Both frames of course interrelate. *Time*, like space a mental construct, is analyzed in terms of linear time as historical, teleological, mechanical time; time as medium of suspense and plot; time as cyclical time and cosmic order, as myth and repetition of the familiar; and time as psychic-existential time, the “moment of being” (Virginia Woolf). In addition there will be a consideration of time as the basis of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The handling of *space* reveals the importance of the disappearance-appearance paradigm, the reduction and abstraction of place, the reduction and expansion of movement, and the incoherent and coherent figuration of the quest. Spatial metaphors like the Moebius strip, the spiral and the labyrinth expose and metaphorically name the paradoxical attempt — in the absence of a rational, conceptual interpretation of the world — to find a stable (spatial) model for what in the narrative process is imaginary, time-bound, fluent and only relative to our perceptions. The notion of the labyrinth as metaphor for the world, the self and the narrative text, for space, time, plot and character, so conspicuous in the work of Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, or Barth, will receive special attention.

Fictional *character* is seen in the context of traditional, structuralist, and poststructuralist concepts. Character by no means disappears, as is often maintained, in postmodern fiction, but rather is transformed into manifold figurations and functions, which no longer focus on the self (at least not in the way modernism did). In fact, “there are all kinds of characters, and characters of all kinds” (Gass 1985, 92). Characters are constructed so as to expose their nature as constructions. They are “scenario-making” (Barth, *OwS* 147), are “empty canvas”, the “noise of [their] names[s]”, “a matter of degree”; they have an “organizing value”, and are “those primary substances to which everything else is attached” (Gass 1970, 45, 50, 51 49). They are “emotional centers”, but are “failure[s] in the practice of ordinary existence” and may “get out of control” (Gass 1985, 102, 32, 284). Perspectivism and paradoxical combinations of often mutually exclusive aspects are foundational to postmodern fiction in general, and to postmodern fictional character in particular. Character as constituent element of the narrated situation must therefore be analyzed in terms of quite contrary notions of what

characters are and can be in fiction, as subjects of experience and thought or simply as intersections of qualities and actions (Barthes), as “stranger[s] in a world of strangers”, (Gass 1985, 249) or as mere “linguistic center[s]” (51), and as “word-beings [...] outside any predetermined condition” (Federman 1975, 13). Though character is not fully separated from a self — in fact it often frustratedly and nostalgically returns to it — it is *decentered* for the purpose of easy transformation. It is “changeable”, “unstable”, “illusory”, “made of fragments” (Federman 1975, 12, 13); it does not have a fixed core and an indissoluble unique essence; the faculties of the mind do not form a unity. The writer can isolate them when creating the narrated world, so that perception, reflection, (mere) “behavior” or action determine the image of the world they create. Feeling and desire, of course, must be included in the cluster of faculties that make up experience, but they will concern us later in the section about character.

*Perception*, a mere sensory rendering of the world, creates only surfaces. In order to mark the problematic relationship between subject and object, the normal processing of the perceived by the categories of understanding is cut off, so that perception stands alone with an abyss between the object and its potential significance. There are now only (futile) attempts of consciousness to understand what is perceived by the senses by reflecting upon it, a procedure that is bound to fail because it has to suspend or relativize the causal and logical ways of understanding. Beckett’s “Imagination Dead Imagine”, Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*, and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* will be our examples. In their different ways, they all reduce the subject to a perceiving consciousness.

*Reflection* (together with imagination) has a central function in the mental economy of consciousness and participates in the creation of its structure. Since consciousness is a central focus of postmodern narrative, reflection also plays a major part. Consciousness is act-like in its outer- and inner-directedness: it processes the data of perception, reflects about circumstances, the self (even if there is none), and love, takes the form of meta-reflection about art, or turns to itself, enquiring about the basis of reflection. John Barth plays on the whole spectrum of reflection and reflection about reflection, rigorously complicating the narrative. Reflection is confronted in its activity, function and relevance with sensory

perception, action, feeling and belief, i.e., a cluster of different activities of the mind and the soul that create other viewpoints. We shall consider them separately. The problematization and assessment of the respective values of these activities and perspectives in the interrelation of subject and object create a kind of ersatz for themes of morality, identity, and truth.

*Behavior* is the key term for Barthelme's program of attenuation and his diagrammatic method, shared by other writers (Hawkes, Brautigan, Vonnegut, Wurlizer). Of course "behavior" of a subject can also include mere observing, just as behavior can be perceived. But it seems advisable to reserve the term "behavior" for a more "factual" attitude toward what is experienced. The diagrammatic method that goes hand in hand with the reduction of the subject to mere behavior makes a point of opposing "[e]xtreme stylistic simplicity in description" and "a very complex ordering" (Butler 49). The text is written from a sensory viewpoint in a cool, distant manner, made strange by simplifying reductions of narrative means in spite of a subject matter that would "normally" call for a sensitive approach and emotional or moral response. Minimalistic strategies and what Barthelme calls "stuffing", "dreck" or "trash", the words that fill the empty spaces between other words and seem heavy and endless, as well as deceptive compromises with realistic methods here effect fragmentation and a maximal fantastification (cf. "The Indian Uprising"). This model of planned incongruity and montage of styles (cf. *Snow White*) negates the whole complex of reader expectations.

Postmodern fiction neglects *action* insofar as action defines the character as a free and self-determined agent. Paranoia is the final impulse for direct action, even when action passes over into drifting as in Pynchon's novels. Drifting is an important image for postmodern fiction because it indicates the state in between acting and being acted upon. It is the key notion in Rudolf Wurlizer's novels *Nog*, *Flats*, and *Quake*, in which drifting includes the fusion and separation of identities without intention and feeling. In postmodern fiction, the Hemingway code of action is replaced by a cult of self-consciousness or passivity so stringent that no action whatever appears to be possible. There is, however, an exception. Action is thematized as the parody of the quest, as a by now aimless, emptied activity, as "just doing" in contrast to "what is worth doing"



(Gaddis, *JR*), or as an expression of the unconscious, as program of resistance against civilizational repression (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*; Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*). While in modernist texts outer *events* have scarcely ever a focusing function (with the exception of Hemingway), the event and the relationship between action and outer *event* plays an important role in many postmodern texts, the event signaling the determination from outside, from some kind of “System”.

The driving force behind the creation of aesthetic worlds is the imagination. Imagination is the key term in postmodern aesthetics. It refers alternately to the intention of the author, the intentionality of the text, and the response of the reader. It is thus the leading principle of postmodern literary production, mediation, and consumption. Even though the term “imagination” is employed with various meanings in various contexts, it is in postmodernism always directed against aesthetic concepts like mimesis, interpretation, and “meaning”, in favor of notions like immanence, indeterminacy, rotation of possibilities. In lieu of the crucial aesthetic beliefs of the 19th century, it starts a new radical exploration of the threshold of the mind (the fantastic) and of language (“language games”) in terms of deconstruction and reconstruction, which are both metonymic and metaphoric.

The romantics, symbolists, and also the modernists already revered the imagination as a faculty of absolute synthesis. Blake held that “This world is all one continued vision of Fancy or Imagination” (qtd. by Casey 1), Poe and Baudelaire spoke of the imagination as the “Queen of the faculties” (Baudelaire 1962, 312), and Baudelaire echoed Blake in saying that “Imagination created the world” (321). In the 20th century, Anatole France stated apodictically that “to know is nothing at all; to imagine is everything” (France, pt. II, ch. 2), and Wallace Stevens followed suit in only slightly more subdued fashion by saying that “The best definition of true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties” (Stevens 24), and that “imagination is the only genius” (25).

The postmodern notion of imagination is different from its modern version. It is more radical and includes all aspects of the mind, from the comparatively simple ability to create images (Hume, Kant) to the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct an ever-faster changing world that resists any kind of final conceptualizing.

Structuralists and poststructuralists have rejected the idea of the primacy of an autonomous imagination, together with the notion of an imagining subject as a transcendental source of meaning, as advocated by philosophers like Kant, Schelling, Husserl, and Sartre. Many postmodern theorists “regard imagination as a mystified and mystifying bourgeois notion, a romantic way of concealing the real roots of creativity which reach down not into some dark inner world but into that ideology which it is the radical critic’s task to demystify” (Washington 163). Deconstruction decenters and devalues the concepts of the autonomous imagination. For Lacan the imaginary is a narcissistic illusion. Althusser and others relate Lacan’s concept of the imagination to ideology in the sense of false consciousness. As an imaginary assemblage the imagination is a “structure of misrecognition” (Althusser 219).<sup>3</sup> After the imagination has lost the status of an independent, integrative faculty, it now has to be defined within an additional frame of reference. At the end of the book the concept of the imagination will lead us to a concluding and synthesizing view, and we will study its conceptualizations in history, especially in postmodernism, and examine Kant’s conception of the beautiful and the sublime in connection with related postmodern concepts.

Postmodern fiction is a self-reflexive art-form, with a keen suspicion of the referential function of language and therefore without any stable relationship to external reality or previously accepted codes of production. Literary standards and rules are exposed as the conventional and artificial, frequently clichéd formulas they are. Our normal expectations of temporal and thematic progression and univocal meaning are suspended and shown in their artifice. Self-reflexivity, expressed in the doubts of author, narrator or character about the world and his or her own art, has its own narrative perspectives. These are the critical stances that arise out of sheer incongruity and lay bare the deficits of society in morals, standards and beliefs, in knowledge and understanding. These stances are, namely, the grotesque, the monstrous, and play, irony, parody and the comic mode. *Satire* aims at criticism of social deformation from a safe value point. The *grotesque* grows out of satire when all values are denied; it denotes the inexplicable deformation of humans by humans. *Farce* may render the grotesque lightly. The *monstrous* is a postmodern outgrowth of the grotesque,

the ineffable extremity of evil. *Play* is here “free” play (Derrida) of the mind upon things, conventions and structures. *Irony* is an attitude of negativity and includes irony as attitude, method, and form. *Parody* ironizes and transforms texts, traditions, and styles, and may gain new work out of an old one. The postmodern *comic* mode is a “free” kind of comic perspective that reduces the comic conflict to a collision of concepts, a flipping-over of positions, the ridiculous simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

We will emphasize the postmodern use of these perspectives of incongruity and deconstruction, and their interaction. For reasons of space, these modes of judgment cannot be analyzed here systematically. Each one must be treated separately and at the same time be put in relation to the other, neighboring perspectives. In anticipation of a longer study that should include the history of these modes and their appearance in the novel of the nineteenth century and of modernism, we will give an overview of the characteristics and change of these perspectives of incongruity and negation at the end of the book. It may suffice to note at this point that all the perspectives mentioned have a more or less independent status as conceptualizations of both *attitudes* and *modes of writing*. As such they have the advantage of designating both general human viewpoints and literary categories. Satire, the grotesque, the monstrous and the comic mode are all critical perspectives; they can be related in a *chain of categories*. By relating these different stances of evaluation with one another in such a series, the scheme of perspectives provides for transitions and overlaps, and thus becomes more flexible. Though the satiric, the grotesque, the comic, and the parodic modes are understood as models of understanding with inherent structures of their own, with different profiles of contradiction and negativity, they all depend on a basis of *incongruity* and have a similar *dualistic* structure. This common base makes their interaction possible and attractive, while the more or less sharp edge provides for variability and change. Play, irony, and the comic mode are fed by lively energies, not structural unities, and in being deconstructive and reconstructive at the same time they are paradoxical in their results. These perspectives are the means of attenuating the stricter modes of negation like satire, the grotesque, and the monstrous and prepare the ground for a multiplication and superimposition of attitudes and viewpoints and foster the resulting

complexities of the postmodern text. Being set against holistic views, against static notions of truth, identity and morals, as well as against the sequential and mono-causal types of narration, these stances favor the serial method of composition and the notion of multi-causality, whether they are rationalized within the text as with Borges and Barth or left unexplained, as autonomous characteristics of the text, as with Robbe-Grillet and frequently with Barthelme, Elkin, and Hawkes. These principles of construction are divorced from the traditional/modern “expressive” aims, or at least relativize them. They perform, play with, and dramatize the possibilities of their own serial form. They lay bare the chaotic internal conflicts of free invention, and thereby establish the postmodern irony of form based on an overall irony of attitude.

To match the complexity of postmodern fiction with a complexity of analytic or descriptive tools is the greatest challenge for the critic. A look at these complexities, together with some remarks about how to face them, may here conclude this introductory chapter. Obviously the critic cannot get very far with concepts of truth, meaning or identity, which are rejected, transformed or multiplied, often excessively, by postmodern writers. The interpreter of meaning and structure in the modernist sense has difficulty in adapting the cognitive frames of reference to these texts and preparing the reader for their reception and evaluation. Critic and reader face texts whose formal strategies replace totality with multiplicity, register the loss of centers (God, reason, identity, history, America, Art), and foreground discontinuity, incoherence, non-structurability, and, instead of uni-linear logic, of progress and synthesis, emphasize rather the “process of making and remaking” (Foucault 1970, 1976) and the practice of reflecting upon the artistic process. In the light of these disquieting circumstances Ihab Hassan certainly has a point when he rejects the analytic and interpretative methods of criticism: “Criticism should learn about discontinuity and become itself less than the sum of its parts. It should offer the reader empty spaces, silences, in which he can meet himself in the presence of literature. This is anti-criticism, or better still, paracriticism” (1970, 91).

Another way to approach these texts, which we will follow, is to describe and analyze what is there, namely the imaginary and its worlds, without ideological prejudice, in the terms of their own

constructive principle, which is pluralism. The *pluralism* of the texts, which is a pluralism of perspectives and procedures, of narration and reflection, and finally of worlds, is established by two basic strategies, *deconstruction* and *reconstruction*. We shall make them the two guiding principles of our approach to American New Fiction. The deconstructive perspectives of play, irony, parody, and the comic mode reduce, even deny the value of coherence, the “good” continuity, and the wholeness of form, values which, intentionally at least, define most of modernist fiction. The reconstruction principle of postmodern fiction therefore has to search for new ways to fulfill its task. As we noted, juxtapositions, situational effects and serial compositions often take the place of integration, causality and plot, or at least transform and multiply their function and meaning. These developments towards decomposition and decenterment are reflected and identified in a number of postmodern paradigms that can be listed in dialectic terms: (1) *disappearance versus appearance*; (2) *absence versus presence*, or presence in absence; (3) *possibility versus actuality*; (4) *isolated segmentation versus logic continuation*; (5) *force versus form*. These are matrices for the situational construction-deconstruction-reconstruction of worlds and will guide the following discussion, which, as mentioned, takes its further criteria from the construction of the narrated situation, the basic unit of fiction. Our argument will be based on the assumption that postmodern fiction, with the complexity of its schemes, further pursues the path that Victor Shklovsky marked with the term “defamiliarization”, defamiliarization of that which has become too familiar and worn out — in the case of postmodern art: the defamiliarization of anthropocentric truth and meaning, as well as of totalizing form. Fiction furthermore “follows” Michael Bakhtin in breaking up the unquestioned organism of art, in refuting the understanding of texts as organic unities, as integrated structures in which all loose ends are finally gathered into aesthetic wholeness. It consequently makes montage and collage the ordering rule of composition, and employs “perspectivism” (Nietzsche), instead of unilinear logic, as a principle of evaluation. The result is *complexity*.

The writers themselves speak of complexity and even chaos as something to seek and to cherish for the deconstruction of form (cf. statements by Federman, Sukenick, and others that will be discussed later). Barth notes the “aesthetic pleasure of complexity, of

complication and unraveling, suspense and the rest” (1984, 114). For Coover the world is characterized by the fact that “each single instant of the world is so impossibly complex, we cannot accumulate all the data needed for a complete, objective statement” (Gado 152). And the complexity of art indeed corresponds to a general paradigm of “complexity”, to what has been called “chaos theory”. The dynamic complexity of “deterministic chaos” (meaning the impossibility of long-term predictions) and of the structural complexity of the object (which cannot be adequately described by scientific methods) have come to influence the natural sciences and have initiated a science of chaos, which, as a matter of course, has also influenced art and art theory (see Gleick). Barth has written a series of essays on “Postmodernism, Chaos Theory, and the Romantic Arabesque” (1995, 275-327) to which we will refer to in a number of cases. In contrast to the modernist intention to reveal in the wholeness of form the coherence behind fragmentation and chaos, the purpose of postmodern form/anti-form is not the interpretation of the world (and the failure of interpretation, together with the alienation of the experiencing subject) but the assessment of, and the playing with, its *non-interpretability*. The siding with non-interpretation in the dialectic of interpretability and non-interpretability that determines human relations to reality and history in their variety and ambivalence, is so important for the postmodern writers and critics that almost all of them directly state their convictions along these lines in interviews, essays or fictional texts. A selection of statements gives us access to the theoretical positions underlying postmodern fiction, now seen from the side of the authors, who also raise the issue of the end of art.

In Sukenick’s words, the new tradition in fiction, “has [...] no ‘meaning.’ It resists interpretation” (1975b, 43-44); and it does so because, in Gass’s words from *The Tunnel*, “there was no world around our weary ears, only meaning; we were being stifled by significance” (343). In a similar vein, Gass says in an interview, “interpretation is a violation. You don’t say to the work, ‘What do you mean?’” (Ziegler and Bigsby 163), but on another occasion he specifies the dilemma that the text-reader relationship creates: “You can’t force interpretations and you can’t prevent them” (LeClair and McCaffery 164). Barthelme notes in “The Balloon”, “we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now”

(UP 16); as Coover says: “There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations” (LeClair and McCaffery 68). The value of the text lies, in Federman’s words, in its participation in a “delightful culture of irrationality”. The New Fiction offers “other alternatives”, reinvents “the world for us”, and is “nonfunctional”. In fact, the novel “gradually loses its function in relation to society” (LeClair and McCaffery 138-139) because of the encroachment of other media. In William Gass’s words (which reflect also Robbe-Grillet’s position), the postmodern text even rejects the notion of “relevance”: “Relevance is meaningless to it [art] [...] works of art must *be relevant by being* [...] I feel no pressure to be relevant” (Bellamy 1974, 40-41). Susan Sontag, one of the first critics to support the New Fiction, argues against “the project of interpretation” which she considers “stifling” because “the merit of these works lies certainly elsewhere than in their ‘meanings’” (7, 9). She notes that “a great deal of today’s art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation. To avoid interpretation, art may become parody. Or it may become abstract. Or it may become (‘merely’) decorative. Or it may become non-art” (10); art employs “techniques that would fragment, dissociate, alienate, break up” (200). Indeed, the anti-representational, self-reflexive postmodern narrative “systematically sets out to short-circuit traditional interpretive temptations” (Jameson 1987, 219).<sup>4</sup> The question of interpretation and interpretability leads directly to questions of composition, of the condition of the created worlds, of their situationalism, which is not only the formative matrix of fiction and the visual arts but also the fundamental condition in culture, and the basis of analysis in psychology, and sociology.

This book will attempt to cover the full range of postmodern American fiction and analyze it under as many frames of reference as possible. Every chapter will have a philosophical/theoretical introduction into the subject treated (i.e., the aesthetics of art and of the environment, the aesthetic attitude, space, time, character, the fantastic, imagination, etc.). The introductory remarks also comprise general aesthetic considerations — for instance about notions like form and force, the symbol, negation, etc. — and comparisons between modernism and postmodernism. Generous reference will be made to concrete examples from fictional texts. Analyses of exemplary narratives, as well as the writers’ own statements about

their aims and methods, the contexts they work in, and the state of literature in their time, serve to illustrate our argument in its various phases. Statements cited from critics about postmodernism and postmodern fiction will date preferably from the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties when the process of evaluation was in full flux but include later utterances if they clarify the situation, as for instance Barth's collection of essays, *Further Fridays* (1995) or Gass's *Finding a Form* (1996). As mentioned, the more than fifty texts by more than fifteen postmodern writers to which we refer will be taken mostly from the Sixties and Seventies. Since cultural critics differ widely in the description of the decisive features of postmodernism and the assessment of its significance, we will begin, as mentioned, with a general overview of concepts and definitions of the postmodern era, as well as the placement of postmodern fiction in the socio-cultural context of its time and the consideration of its national and transnational features.



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## 2. Postmodern Culture, Aesthetics, and the Arts

### 2.1. Definitions and Conceptions of Postmodernism

Historically, postmodernism as an important category evolves from the Sixties, though, as mentioned, the term has been used a number of times before, mostly with regard to the crisis of civilization (see Köhler for details). The Sixties have been called “our most explosive decade”, a time of turmoil, of “an experiment in political theatre” (Dickstein 23), a time “of enormous hope, idealism, energy, creativity, overreaching, arrogance and sheer folly” (Howard xiv). It gave birth to radical political, social, and cultural movements whose watchword was liberation, liberation from intellectual, social, and sexual restraints. But it is obviously a period that is not susceptible to any kind of easy summary. For those who followed both the “quest for social justice” and “the search for personal authenticity” (Howard 20), it was not easy to combine the personal and the social. In view of the modish cult that defined the language of liberation, it was difficult to distinguish between “apparent freedom” (Marcuse) and real freedom, “between the authentic and the ephemeral, the genuinely revolutionary and the merely self-indulgent, the hard-won insight and the borrowed attitude” (Howard 17). This made for confusions, contradictions, and collisions of thoughts and feelings, which finally got out of control when the sense of frustration, of unrealized hopes got the upper hand. Gass notes another effect of the Sixties: “Because the Sixties didn’t permanently alter the nature of man, life, and state, the seventies were sullen” (1985, 189).

In the continuum between culture and art, fiction in the Sixties confirms both the liberating and the deconstructive drives in culture, not, however, by reflecting lifestyle, civil rights movements, or new politics, but by an exuberant creation of new work, a playful and ironic attitude, and a decomposition of its own traditional logic of cohesion and integration. Postmodern fiction joins the rebellion against the Fifties and late modernism in its own way by turning against the three pillars of modern art, the concepts of reality, identity and totalizing artistic form, and by developing its own “imagined alternatives” (Goodman). It was the deconstruction of “traditional loyalties, ties and associations” (Howe 426), the ex-

perience of a sharpened sense of new possibility and diversity, and the willingness to experiment, rethink, and redefine, that caused what has been called “a revolutionary explosion of the arts” (Howard 267). Donald Barthelme notes: “There seems to be considerable energy in American writing at the moment; it seems a fruitful time” (LeClair and McCaffery 43). Robert Coover, looking back, speaks of the exciting phase of the Sixties and the Seventies, “when writing in the Americas seemed to be enjoying such a renaissance” (LeClair and McCaffery 65); he recognizes a “general awareness, by writers of both North and South America, that we have come to the end of a tradition, [...] that our ways of looking at the world and of adjusting to it through fictions are changing. The New World is peculiarly alert to this” (Gado 142). John Barth notes that he and his colleagues “have followed out certain currents in their own thinking”, that “[c]ertain sensitivities have been sharpened” (Gado 123, 130). The sharpened sensitivity turns against the simplifications of society, it takes note of the fact that, as Federman puts it, the “world, as we received it [...], what Sartre used to call the Age of Reason, was all spoiled, saturated with crap [...]. It looked dead” (LeClair and McCaffery 138). Gass makes the tension between society and art a fundamental one: “Naturally the artist is an enemy of the state. He cannot play politics, succumb to slogans and other simplifications [...] He is also an enemy of every ordinary revolution. As a man he may long for action; he may feel injustice like a burn; and certainly he may speak out. But the tornup street is too simple for him when he sculpts or paints. He undermines everything [...] he cannot simplify, he cannot overlook, he cannot forget, omit, or falsify. [...] The artist’s revolutionary activity is of a different kind. He is concerned with consciousness, and he makes his changes there” (1970, 288-89).

The Sixties turned into major trends what had before been minor currents of resistance. Norman Mailer wrote in “The White Negro”: “these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve” (243). “One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one’s own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an élite by being a radical were forever gone” (242-43). This time has experienced “a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled”. Yet his solution conforms to the

intellectual climate of the time by being personal: Mailer discovered “the American existentialist” (243), an ideal that is not quite the one of the liberating movements of the Sixties (which also liberated the arts from the modernist cult of alienation). The new trends challenge the innovative artistic imagination to establish new contents and new forms.

Though postmodernism evolves out of a the specific condition of the sixties, it reaches beyond the sixties and becomes the signum of a whole era and its social and cultural trends. The prefix “post-” offers a first approach to the phenomenon postmodernism as a socio-cultural category: it marks both its deconstructive and reconstructive aspects. Though there are early uses of the terms postmodern and postmodernism,<sup>5</sup> mostly pointing to the darker sides of civilization, we shall here concentrate on its meaning from the Fifties on. What Lyotard called the “postmodern condition” of our media, consumer and market society, however, has not just one name, i.e., postmodern and its linguistic derivations. The multiplying energy of the time also overwhelms the naming of the post-phenomenon. The proliferation of designations may diffuse the contours of postmodernism, but it also indicates the wide spread of the post-situation into all spheres of life. Our time or, rather, the period up to the end of the Eighties, has not only been called postmodern, but also post-social, post-historical, post-ideological, post-utopian, post-political, post-fascist, post-aesthetic, post-development, post-revolutionary, post-colonial, post-industrial, post-cultural, post-metaphysical, post-humanist, post-human, post-existential, post-absurd, post-male, post-white, post-heroic, post-philosophical, post-avantgarde, post-innovation, post-mimetic, post-Protestant, post-Marxist, post-Americanist, post-contemporary, etc. All these terms attest to a sense of immanence, to the fact that the dominance of meta-discourses has come to an end, that something new has occurred but is finding it difficult to crystallize into a definable entity of its own. Unity is here multiplicity, an energetic “unitas multiplex”, a unity of collage without hierarchy. *Pluralism* is the catchword, pluralism of viewpoints and definitions.

Postmodernism is not a stable entity but changes in time. Among the criteria applied to it are anti-modernism, an anything-goes attitude, and pluralism. The debate about postmodernism reveals a kind of “logical” development. According to Hans Bertens, at

the beginning the newness of the term and the insecurity as to its scope and meaning were suggested by the use of a hyphen (post-modern) and of quotation marks (“postmodern”). The term was used in architecture and literature to describe a new, anti-modern sensibility and style (Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler). In the second stage, at the end of the Sixties, an attempt was made to define postmodernism more rigorously as an overall cultural, social, and political phenomenon and to characterize it, in contrast to an allegedly exhausted and surpassed modernism, as a new stage of human culture and civilization (Hassan). While for instance modernism is defined by rationality, transcendence, continuity, and depth, postmodernism is said to be characterized by irrationality, immanence, discontinuity or difference, and surface. Not all attempts to define the postmodern era were in favor of it, and the discussion between supporters of the new lifeworld’s concepts and aesthetics and their despisers were often vociferous (Newman). They created an aesthetics-versus-ethics debate, the negative voices accusing postmodernism of substituting aesthetics for ethics, which allegedly leads to an indifferent and therefore irresponsible “anything-goes” attitude (Feyerabend). The Marxist Frederic Jameson describes postmodern culture as a condition arising out of late capitalism and calls it rather pointedly an “absolute and absolutely random pluralism [...] a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems” (1992, 372). Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, on the other hand, see in the “postmodern emphasis on disintegration and change” chances for “new openings and possibilities for social transformation and struggle”, a way toward “a more diverse, open and contextual politics that refuses to privilege any general recipes for social change or any particular group” (28).

This characterizes already the third stage of conceptualization, the re-politicization of postmodernism in the mid-1980s. The broad acceptance of the term since the end of the Seventies gave it more weight and brought into the debate the participation of new groups, interests, and ideologies and signified an inclusion of the democratizing tendencies of the Sixties. Marxists, feminists, and ethnic groups that had at first shown the cold shoulder to a seemingly “anything-goes” consumer and media culture and a deconstructionist theory that seemed to define postmodernism —

from their reform point of view — only in negative terms entered the field and provided more socially critical views along the lines of gender, race, and class. Ethnic literature now entered the stage of postmodernism with, for instance, the African-American author Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*) and the Native American novelist Gerald Vizenor (*Griever: An American Monkey King in China*). In the course of the debate the concept of postmodernism split. A “good” postmodernism, fostering pluralism, the respect for difference and otherness, was contrasted to a “bad” postmodernism that promoted the allegedly anything-goes attitude of indifference and mere consumption. Though the term gained its greatest popularity in the late Eighties and still showed great vitality at the beginning of the nineties, one might argue, as already mentioned, that, at least in the definition of the intellectual climate, it had worn itself out by 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the breakdown of state socialism in Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, the shifting of political, social, economic and cultural realities, and the beginning of an era of new assumptions, needs and obligations that were no longer subsumable under the concept of postmodernism. Yet there is a lot of confusion in the use of the term and the analysis of the current condition, and one cannot but recognize that the postmodern culture of consumption, of the media and the spectacle continues to determine the contemporary world still at the beginning of the millennium.

The definitions of postmodernism come to differ according to the principles of inclusion or exclusion, affirmation or resistance, mainstream or opposition, deconstruction or reconstruction. The following list may exemplify in more detail the various approaches to postmodernism and the ways they complement and contradict each other, but also give an impression of the difficulties involved in the attempt to render the term meaningful not only for one field of activity but for the social, cultural and artistic aspects of society in general.<sup>6</sup> (1) The realm of aesthetics, art, and textuality dominated the discussion up to the late Seventies; postmodern art is seen to be “purified”, i.e., cleansed from such totalizing concepts as “reality”, “truth”, “logic”, “meaning”, and interpretation in favor of the imaginary, the self-reflexive, the incoherent, the discontinuous, and the immanent (Fiedler, Sontag, Hassan). (2) An existentialist postmodernism (Spanos, Palmer), claims that “the postmodern

imagination [...] is an existential imagination”, and that, by an “aesthetic of decomposition”, it exposes “the primordial not-at-home, where dread, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger and Sartre and Tillich tell us, becomes not just the agency of despair but also and simultaneously of hope, that is, of freedom and infinite possibility”(Spanos 1972, 148, 156). This is a concept of postmodern art that stands in contrast to the later dominant idea of textuality, to the surrender of reality to language current in poststructuralism. (3) Partly connected with existentialist postmodernism is a postmodernism of immediacy, energy, and performance art (Benamou, Paoletti), in which “the artist as shaman becomes a conductor of forces which go far beyond those of his own person, and is able to bring art in touch with its sacred sources” (Gablik 126), for instance in the performances and assemblages of Joseph Beuys, who conceives of the artist as shaman, it finds another place of intensity in the theatre, inspired by Artaud (Schechner, Blau).

(4) There is then the inclusive postmodernism of hybridity, which does not so much aim at intensities but at expansion, combination of styles. In fiction it connects various strategies, narration, reflection, representation, interrelated by the postmodern irony of form, or in what Alan Wilde calls “mid-fiction” (1976, 47), a fiction that “manages to combine the problematic and the assentive” and to connect “the oppositional extremes of realism and reflexivity” in a kind of pluriform (1982, 182, 192); hybridity is especially striking in postmodern architecture, which breaks most radically with modern concepts and forms, and, according to Venturi, is characterized by elements that “are hybrid rather than ‘pure,’ compromising rather than ‘clean,’ distorted rather than ‘straightforward’ [...] I am for messy vitality over obvious unity” (16). The arts employ the strategies of parody (Barth) and pastiche, i.e., “blank parody”, with “nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity”, in Jameson’s critical phrasing (1983, 114), and with “palimpsest”, i.e. the superimposition, for instance in architecture, of past forms upon each other. (5) The concept of “double coding” that Jencks advanced is based on the hybridity of form. It allows for different kinds of reception according to the standard of information, insight and (professional) interest the viewer has; it extends “the language of architecture in many different ways — into the vernacular, towards tradition and the commercial slang of the street.

Hence the double coding, the architecture which speaks to the elite and the man on the street” (8); the concept of double coding in the general sense of double focus becomes one of the most popular ideas in the analysis of postmodernism, for instance in literature and popular culture (Hutcheon, Collins).

(6) The deconstructive features, especially of aesthetic postmodernism, received a philosophical underpinning by the poststructuralist philosophies of deconstruction, resistance, and difference that gave language central place, dissolved the subject, and attacked representation, wholeness and (terroristic) reason, advancing at the same time diversity, uncertainty, undecidability, and dissemination of meaning; poststructuralism came to be regarded (in the early Eighties) as the philosophic version of postmodernism though there are important differences (Barthes, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard). (7) Lyotard’s “postmodern sublime” turns against the “cynical eclecticism” of much of postmodern art (this would include Jencks’s and Venturi’s postmodern concepts of architecture) and demands that art concern itself with the unrepresentable, distinguishing the jubilation, free experimentation, and anti-representationalism of the postmodern sublime from the modern nostalgic sublime that still represents alienation and offers “the solace of good forms”(1984c, 340). (8) In contrast to the exclusive intention of Lyotard’s elitist concept of the postmodern sublime, the inclusive viewpoint finds a subversive potential also in popular (and mass) culture (Collins, Wyver); or it sees in postmodern culture — in opposition to what Bauman calls the “crisis theorists” (for whom “the identity of present-day society is fully negative”) and their cry against the threat of deadening uniformity — a plurality of choice, for “[t]he market thrives on variety; so does consumer freedom and with it the security of the system” (Bauman 47, 52).

(9) The “crisis theorists” come from the leftist and Marxist camp and often take up ideas from the post-Marxist, deconstructionist philosophy of the poststructuralists though their aim is cultural criticism in more concrete terms. In the early Eighties they join the debate, which was first dominated by the anti-consensus and pro-difference attitude of the poststructuralists, and direct their harsh criticism against the mainstream culture, which they see as an outgrowth of late capitalism and the marketplace, i.e. the “anything-



goes” attitude of irresponsible consumerism (Jameson). Though the neo-Marxists and the poststructuralists more or less could agree on the negative evaluation of the mainstream, their recommended countermoves are quite different. (10) To take two radically different viewpoints (which however meet in the preference for what Lyotard called “little narratives” over the “grand narratives” of emancipation): while Habermas — believing in universal reason and the necessity of promoting further the project of modernism — criticizes the increased penetration of the social world by mere “standards of economic and administrative rationality” and demands a “communicative rationality” (on a local basis) for the solution of social problems (1981, 7-8), the poststructuralists, conversely — as countermoves both to the rigidities of instrumental rationality and Habermas’s philosophy of consensus — turn the other way and propagate, of course in various ways, radical politics of resistance, nomadism and movement, and the perpetuation of dissensus (Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault). (11) Out of the criticism of postmodern culture at large, the devaluation of the mainstream, developed a support of marginality and otherness that spread over almost all camps, especially the leftist cultural critique, and favored an increasing climate of tolerance and the respect of differences, of ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference (Lipsitz, Jameson). Todd Gitlin notes that postmodern politics is a “politics of limits”. It “respects horizontal social relations — multiplicity over hierarchy, juxtaposition over usurpation, difference over deference” (359). Yet the contrary is also true. Jameson claims that postmodernism allows no genuine politics, while older politics “sought to coordinate local and global struggles” (1992, 330); and Sabina Lovibond, accusing postmodernism of abandoning the modern project of Enlightenment and its belief in progress and reason, warns that “postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt” (160).

(12) Baudrillard is an extreme case of the “crisis theorists”. Because he combines social criticism with criticism of the media and goes to (and beyond) the limit of the argument, he had in the Eighties a great influence in the American scene, also on Jameson and quite generally on media criticism. He may serve us here to document the ultimate disenchantment with the concepts of enlightenment, though much remains unexplained, willful, and irrational in his discussion.

His fierce analysis and apocalyptic criticism of the postmodern condition — proposing that a new stage in history has arrived in which codes and signs have become the primary reality — reduces all differences to the differences of signs, suggesting that “the system of consumption is based on a code of signs (objects/signs) and differences, and not on need and pleasure” (Baudrillard 1988b, 44). Generalizing his sign theory, he claims that in a society dominated by the media and their images, the social reality, even power and politics, are replaced by the hyper-reality of mere simulacra, so that “[t]he process of signification is, at bottom, nothing but a gigantic *simulation model of meaning*” (Baudrillard 1988b, 91); in fact, “we must think of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a sort of genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyper real” (1983b, 55), a hyperreal which we can neither conceptualize nor control. Here the cultural and the economic have become exchangeable; the social has disappeared. From a point of view that is based on what Baudrillard calls in the title of an article “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media” (1983a) and that totalizes the sign’s control over reality, he can argue that criticism is of no use, that the criticizer of society and the criticized are leveled in status because of their “false” picture of reality, their common “Western rationalism”, and utilitarianism. Leaving his own Marxism behind, he can therefore maintain that “Marxism is only the disenchanting horizon of capital” (1975, 60). In his relentless and brutally overstated view, “[p]ostmodernity [...] is a game with the vestiges of what has been destroyed. This is why we are ‘post’ —history has stopped, one is in a kind of post-history which is without meaning” (Baudrillard 1984, 19).<sup>7</sup>

These differing views indicate that postmodernism is not to be understood in the singular but in the plural. As already mentioned, there are at least three areas that the term designates, postmodern culture at large, postmodern theory (the term theory replacing the allegedly outmoded concept of philosophy which is contested as discipline and institution because of its traditional concern with structure, center and wholeness), and postmodern art and literature. The first kind, postmodern culture, has not aged at all; quite on the contrary, it has expanded, but not as a unified entity. In accordance with the trends towards decentralism in a “disorganized society” where order is at best “local, emergent and transitory” (Bauman 47,

189), culture is pluralized, too, is divided and dissected, the parts and subcultures relating with one another only in a “flexible accumulation” (D. Harvey 171). The second field, theory with its utopian ideas and prophetic visions, has aged most, and this might include at least the radical forms of deconstructionism and the Marxist criticism of the System. The third area, literature, music, and the visual arts, differ in their development and their postmodern characteristics, as we will see later, but the experimental arts in all their (complex) forms have kept to their age-old function to tell the truth(s) by both reflecting/confirming the trends of the times and subverting them, marking their deficits in knowledge and understanding — however the prerequisites, concepts and strategies of art may have changed — and in the process now going to extremes of excess, to the point of self-deconstruction.

For all three areas of postmodernism the perspectives of time and history are important and make for another three variations or aspects for each of the three. This has to do with the fact that all designations of periods and intellectual areas, both “the Sixties” and postmodernism, are mental constructs serving heuristic purposes, establishing what Luhmann calls “systems of differentiation”, whose categories do not describe the things as they are but to whose discerning constructions the things “answer” in intelligible (or non-intelligible), always plural ways. The status of betweenness is crucial, the betweenness of the designated world between the one reality characterized and its multiplication and deconstruction. These systems of differentiation and their categories operate on various levels of abstraction. First, the spirit of a time, as Borges knew, looks for forerunners and extends the historical scale in order to increase its weight. Postmodern deconstructionism have claimed as forefathers Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Heidegger, Wittgenstein among the philosophers and theorists; Joyce, Kafka, Faulkner or Poe as “proto-postmodernist” (Barth 1995, 291) among the literary authors; Dada and Surrealism among the artistic movements. Second, postmodernism has been considered a kind of (deconstructive) sensibility, a cyclical phenomenon, which, since history is not only a uni-linear process but also a repetition of anthropological constants, of basic attitudes, can be found in all or at least in many eras — though in different historical constellations and under various dominants. One may then reveal postmodern traits in de Sade,

Montaigne, Cervantes or Shakespeare, and a host of other writers, even in the Middle Kingdom in Egypt or the Roman Silver Age (McEvilly). Third, one may come finally to the paradoxical conclusion that, in Lyotard's words, postmodernism is not "modernism at its end but in the nascent state", i.e., it signifies the deconstructive phase of openness, fluidity, and indeterminacy before reorganization and consistency set in (1984c, 79).

Already in the Fifties the first postmodern novels appear. Written in an anticipatory spirit, they break up traditional schemes of representation and evaluation, what Charles Olson, the Black Mountain poet and one of the first promoters of postmodernism in literature, already in 1951 called the "old controlling humanism" (5). Hawkes's *The Cannibal*, actually the first postmodern novel, appears in 1949, Gaddis's *The Recognitions* in 1955, William Burroughs's solipsistic *Naked Lunch* in 1959, his cut-up novel *The Exterminators* (written with Brian Gyson) in 1960, and Joseph Heller's seminal *Catch 22* in 1961. They all recognize and make use of the productive potential that lies in the "gaps of power", the "power vacuum" (McElroy 12,15) between deconstruction and reconstruction. The transformation of both the political and the cultural scene in the Sixties — the rebellion against the bourgeois, morally austere, tranquillized Fifties, their social decorum and conceptual schemes — is fueled by energy, intensity, and free form (cf. Dickstein). All three characterize also postmodernism and the postmodern arts. Postmodern fiction heralds energy, free form, and intensity.

As always the relationship between the arts and the socio-cultural condition is complex because art and artistic self-reflection both confirm and subvert the trends of the times. Gass remarked that the new fiction is new not by joining the "movement" but by changing consciousness, by promoting radical artistic innovation, by the intensification of irony as attitude and form, by the aesthetic of montage and collage, by an accentuation of both form (Sontag) and anti-form (Fiedler, Hassan) in a paradoxical process of exhaustion and replenishment. Postmodern fiction reflects and confirms the surface orientation of the contemporary general culture by rejecting the essentialism of self and form, as well as the "strong" meta-concepts of rational order, continuity, causality, teleology, and wholeness, and the general depth orientation of romantic and modern art, and instead keeping to the surface of character and plot and the

situational context. Yet while art confirms the revolutionary trends of culture, it at the same time subverts, and that in two ways. First, the coolly distant and ironic attitude of the arts contradicts the idealism, political engagement, and self-indulgence of the Sixties; these cultural trends are parried with the sense of the spiritual vacancy in all the feverish activities, in the infinite expectations, the accelerated and multiplied “advances”, the revolutionary fervor. The freedom of the imagination is set against the perception of failed promises, and missed opportunities, of resentfulness and confusion, the lack of problem-solving. Yet the subversive spirit has also more specific, aesthetic targets. It manifests itself aesthetically (a) in the ironic relation of art to the affirmative aesthetic of the cultural environment, and (b) in the deconstruction of the modern ideology of totalizing form. The disruptive force of the individual text now allows no position to stand, reveals the immanent contradictions of theory and practice, and rebels against meaning, interpretation, and the concepts of art in general. Though this experimentalism is political by its subversive potential, and though the artist “views the transactions of life through a lens of concept” (Gass 1970, 62), postmodern art does not aim at a change of politics. Ginsberg’s call for “magic politics”, a kind of “poetry and theater, sublime enough to change the national will and open the consciousness in the populace” (qtd. in Dickstein 22), is a fanciful illusion. Robbe-Grillet, Mailer, Susan Sontag, Barthelme, Gass, and many others — in a continuation of modern tenets — emphasized the autonomy of art. They maintained, in Robbe-Grillet’s succinct formulation: “[i]f art is anything, it is everything; in which case it must be self-sufficient, and there can be nothing beyond it” (qtd. in Sontag 28).

In a turn against modernism the particular narrative is no longer seen to be the transformation of an aesthetic deep structure or an essence, the universal essence of human narrativity (Lévi-Strauss), nor of a universal system with “distinguishable *regularities*” that lead to the construction of a “*narrative grammar*” (Greimas). It does not have “a geometry of [its] own” (H. James 1921, x), does not consist of a “logical relation” of “successive events” in a “causal” narrative “chain” (Bal 102-104). Narrative no longer creates links between the known and the unknown by providing ideas of beginning and end, conflict and reconciliation, quest and conclusion, by connecting decay and renewal, despair and hope. Foregrounded are “hybridity,

impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs” (Rushdie 4). Under these circumstances, in Gass’s words, “collage is the blessed method. [...] It works wonders, because in collage logical levels rise and fall like waves” (1979, 282). For Barth, the image of the wave is a central metaphor for the characterization of life, the story, and the narrative process in general (see below).

## **2.2. Aesthetics of Art vs. Aesthetics of the Environment**

In postmodern culture the difference between civilization (utility values) and culture (highest goals of the human mind) is dissolved, and the borderlines between what used to be called high culture and low or popular culture are blurred. But conversely, these boundaries are also reasserted, and that more than ever before. There are two contrary developments that demonstrate that the circumference of the postmodern sphere of art is always changing and dynamically related to historical developments, to shifts in the structure of society and the cultural field. On the one hand, the aesthetic contracts into the elitist complexity of high art. Against the certainties of culture it sets uncertainty and self-reflexivity in a pluralism of perspectives and narrative means, giving “overt expression to its motive, provid[ing] its own evaluation” (Gass 1970, 109); it actually creates such a maze of a network, that the appreciation of its “irrealism” (Barth) presupposes a high level of information and cultural knowledge, and limits its effect of resistance to the socio-cultural system it works in (Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Elkin, Gaddis, Gass, Hawkes, Pynchon). On the other hand, aesthetics expands and reaches beyond the autonomy and cognitive stance of art, extending into what one might call, in contrast to the aesthetic of art, of the art system, the aesthetic of the environment<sup>8</sup> or the cultural field, which includes popular culture, decoration, design, lifestyle. The environmental or cultural aesthetic, as it were, recurs to a more vague and inclusive, in fact pre-modern notion of aesthetics that includes entertainment and didactics without excluding form. This development signals a widening of our “sensibility to the possibility within the notion of aesthetics” (Diffey 10); it incites the re-inclusion into aesthetics, for instance, of the “urge [of people] to

render the world around them an aesthetically pleasing one” (Zuniga 43).

All this complicates the status of art in a cultural field that is de-hierarchized, but still has its rules and directives. They fill in the blanks and narrow choices, and decide and define and may call into question the values of intrinsic aesthetic uniqueness, which used to give art its cultural validation but by now is perhaps rated as superfluous or too “heavy” and complicated; it is an innovative aesthetic uniqueness attained by reckless honesty and an experimental design, in which “every element [is] related, every relation enriched, every meaning multiplied, every thought or sensation [...] every desire or revelation, every passion, precisely defined and pushed to its finest and fullest expression”, and, one might add, pushed to its limit (Gass 1985, 202). The paradoxical dialectic of art between cultural confirmation (of energy, intensity and free form) and cultural subversion (of simplifications, slogans, political illusions) that characterizes postmodern fiction and also the individual text repeats itself in the relationship between the aesthetic of art and the aesthetic of the environment. The aesthetic text is generally subversive in its assumptions and its conceptual system of considerable complexity, while the aesthetic products from the general cultural store, on the contrary, are affirmative and pleasurable. As mentioned, postmodern art and postmodern culture in general share the liberation from intellectual, social and cultural constraints, and they also have in common the central maxim that evolves out of this broadening of possibilities, namely *pluralism* (including relativism and perspectivism). But aesthetic pluralism in art is quite different from aesthetic pluralism in the cultural field. In the former it is epistemologically grounded, is based on the rivalry between material and design, and leads to a multiplication of aesthetic entities; in the latter pluralism derives from a loss of social coherence, from “multiculturalism” in a most general sense, from a desire for variety and change, and the power of the marketplace.

Art and the marketplace have always constituted a subtle symbiosis. But the market has now undergone a process of emancipation from the dictates of art. The result is that art, in order to be marketable, needs a formula (Pop art, minimalism, constructionist art, new expressionism, and so on); and the market requires that this formula be subject to modish change. As to verbal art, the might of

the market forces authors, publishers and distributors to serve the penchant of the audience for entertainment, and, together with the preponderance of the electronic media, it forces experimental literature — which uses its complexity, its “thickness”, intensity and focus (Gass), against easy consumability by the reader — to a place on the margin, without, however, being able to remove its prestige, at least in academic circles, though its pretensions are now more modest than those of its modern predecessors. Gass in an essay about “Pulitzer: The People’s Prize” writes: “The Pulitzer has perceived an important truth about our complex culture: Serious literature is not important to it; however, the myth must be maintained. Ceremony is essential”. Facing the “discrepancy between the acknowledged importance of our literature to our culture and the pitiful public support it gets” (1996,10), Gass expounds the reasons, why “works of art [are] so socially important”, not “for the messages they may contain [...] but because they insist more than most on their own reality; because of the absolute way they exist”, because of their “honesty”, their “presence” or “concentration”, their “awareness” and “unity of being”, because of the way they “confront us [...] completely, openly, at once” (1970, 282- 83, 86-87). This is an assessment of art’s merit as construction of undeceiving experience that would be shared by most of the postmodern writers, and that also reveals, in spite of all the changes in the cultural and artistic climate, the continuity between aesthetic modernism and postmodernism in their appraisal of art’s autonomy and its function of revealing the social deficits of knowledge and understanding, hereby stressing the fragility, the framing, and the distortion of knowledge, the importance and limitation of point of view, and the multiplicity of every word and sentence.

While pluralism in the arts is a pluralism generated by uncertainty and honesty, pluralism in the multi-layered and decentered cultural environment is a pluralism of *functions*. The variety of cultural offers, i.e., decoration, museum artifacts, shows and spectacles, formulaic fiction, film or TV series, serves to satisfy the needs and interests of various social groups of the population, defined by age, education, or profession. The overall function of cultural aesthetics and its popular commercial forms wavers between entertainment and cognition, emphasizing the former, but hardly ever excluding the latter. Both entertainment and cognition combine to



avoid entropy in a society that has more and more leisure, the meaning of entropy here being boredom. The struggle between the satisfaction of the audience with what it is used to, the conventional, and its dissatisfaction with mere repetition and the familiar explains the central paradox of the aesthetic of the environment or cultural aesthetics: the ineluctable interrelation of *sameness* and *difference*, *seeming* and *being*. The breakdown of regional and national barriers, the availability of easy mobility and communication, the progress of technology, and the commercialization of social and cultural life foster sameness, while tedium and weariness ask for stimulation of body, soul, and mind by the new and the different. The desire for diversity and change is gratified by the conflicting energies of the cultural scene, a pluralization of the cultural menu in general, the simultaneous offer of different “events”, stagings, shows, programs, ideas, subcultures and leisure-time occupations of all sorts. The double coding of the cultural field in terms of sameness and difference affects all cultural products, including ethics, beliefs, living conditions, the arts, and also the postmodern novel. The result of all this is that “strong” political or ethical ideas lose in power, and pluralistic culture gains in weight. What we have now is a “*cultural society*”. Society is to be understood “by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems” (D. Harvey 291). The attitude of consumerism in an affluent society has strengthened the power of the cultural market and the cultural institutions and has brought about a wide spectrum of cultural contents and forms. In our “society of the spectacle” (Debord), history is just an image, an event, a spectacle, an endless reserve of equal events for diverse cultural tastes, for a collage of current uses to be (re-) produced at will. This tendency towards the spectacle has produced a specific postmodern consciousness, a kind of museum mentality, which is no longer, characterized by a recourse to historical logic, to origin, chronology and causality, but by the noncommittal simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. The arts are part of this leveled cultural scene: they are again double-coded, functioning under the rubrics both of diversity or difference *within* the cultural menu and of resistance *against* it from “*outside*” the conventional and well-regulated. The postmodern novel pluralizes history, just as the museum mentality does, but the narrative pluralization does not serve entertainment and knowledge. It

provides for the differentiation of perspectives out of epistemological reasons, because no one perspective can represent the truth, because there is no wholeness of vision, neither of the past, nor of the present, nor of the future — nor of time as a whole. Feeling impaired in self-understanding and self-placement, the human being can only protect the self against the vagaries of the time by desperately playing with the evolving uncertainties which open the void (Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*; Coover, *The Public Burning*).

While the aesthetics of art contracts in a field of uncertainty, cultural aesthetics expands to such an extraordinary extent that we come to experience the world through secondary images. In fact, the aesthetic coverage or rather transformation of the world inundates the “real” in such a totalizing way by the sheer volume of the omnipresent, media-transmitted images, formulas, and decorative forms that they not only enrich and decorate the world but also hamper our direct, sensory apprehension of “reality”, whatever that may be. In this sense one may speak of an image culture, an *aestheticization* of the world, including the world of commodities. As Mike Featherstone notes:

In this aestheticized commodity world the department stores, arcades, trams, trains, streets and the fabric of buildings and the goods on display, as well as the people who stroll through these spaces, summon up half-forgotten dreams as the curiosity and memory of the stroller is fed by the ever-changing landscape in which objects appear divorced from their contexts and subject to mysterious connections which read on the surface of things. The everyday life of the big cities becomes aestheticized (23).

The pluralization of aesthetics, the aestheticization of the lifeworld and the blurring of borderlines between the aesthetic domains have consequences for the arts. The growing influence and power of the electronic media bring about a leveling of quality standards; with the decline of the high status of art and its claim to exclusiveness, a dislocation of formerly existing norms of quality *within* the arts also comes to pass. A “democratization” or pluralization of the criteria of judgment takes place. This has a number of consequences. There is the growing sense that every segment of society has the right to its own tastes and can choose the ways to satisfy them, and that highbrow judgments are therefore elitist and irrelevant. If there is no dominant aesthetic norm that requires a certain, closely circumscribed significance of aesthetic

form and is based on a hierarchy of values, the whole literary scene and all its gradations have to be reconsidered in their shape. Anthony Burgess then has a point, when he says that “[w]e have to judge *The Day of the Jackal* or *The Crash of '79* by standards which neglect the Jamesian desiderata” (15); that is, we have to judge them by standards of their own, whether we like them or not. Without shared criteria for “good” art, one can only note, as Lyotard does: “I judge, but if I am asked by what criteria I judge, I will have no answer to give” (Lyotard and Thébaud 15). As Umberto Eco has written:

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not the prisoners of the mass media. Well, it’s all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what’s going on (1986, 150).

In addition, elitist judgments seem to have become irrelevant because at least part of the popular arts, for instance naive painting or folk music, fulfils the most stringent aesthetic requirements of form in their own way. Furthermore, conversely, complex modern, even surrealist art in the museum has lost its shock value and therewith its subversive function—a central criterion of high art. It has found a mass audience, and, with the deprivation of its ability to subvert, has been trivialized. This is true of modern authors, too, for instance Hemingway and Fitzgerald. An increase of complexity seems to be the only protection (if there is a protection) against trivialization over time. The high complexity or complex simplicity of postmodern fiction finds here an explanation—though it is only one explanation among others to which we will refer later. The pluralization of standards is repeated in the private sphere of the reader. The knowledge has spread that not only every section of society but also every single person has the right and even the urgent need to fulfill his or her specific cultural wants in quite different, popular as well as high, fields of culture simultaneously, reading with (equal) interest and pleasure both “high” art novels and “low” science or detective fiction, which was formerly considered “kitsch”. This is a distinction that is modernist and has lost much of its currency. And finally, the act of reading itself, whatever the text may be, also has a mixed profile; it is indeed pluralistic: it includes unfocused claims, mixed

motives, differences in mood, inclination and understanding, interrelations and crossovers between meaning and pleasure. We shall come back to the problem of evaluation from another point of view, i.e., the question of what is art, in the section about the aesthetic attitude.

The abandonment or curtailment of elitist claims has facilitated the transgression of borderlines between the art discourse and culture at large in both directions. Kitsch is called art, and art exploits popular culture. In crossing the borders (which are no longer fixed borders but can be established and deconstructed at will), aesthetic forms deriving from the popular cultural store may be refunctioned into complex art and vice versa. Ideological barriers are thus dissolved, but, paradoxically, are reconfirmed at the same time, since high art and popular art have different intentions and functions. The experimental visual arts, for instance, make use of the (in terms of modernist art) “anti-aesthetic” aestheticization of the environment, its images, formulas, icons, clichés, and lifestyles, as a source of replenishment — transforming them, however, in the process. The Pop artists of the early Sixties, painters like Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and the forerunner of Pop art, Rauschenberg, employ the clichéd promises and floating images of the cultural media, while at the same time they ironize them. Still having a strong fine arts tradition in America to fall back on and staying, even if precariously, on the side of the (subversive) art system, these painters in fact triple-code the artwork. (1) They return to “reality”, but (2) ironize this return to a world which by now has become a product of consumption and of the fiction-producing media, and (3) nevertheless use this faked return for the replenishment of subject matter and creative energy. Something similar happens to the experimental novel, though the interaction of levels is here less transparent, the medium of language and narrative being more complex than the image in painting. The “New Novel”, as it has been called, adopts the formulas of popular fiction, the fairy tale, the western, the adventure story, the spy and the detective novel, as well as science fiction. Their formulas of melodramatic plot, black-and-white characterization, clear-cut moral oppositions, sentimental feelings, and affirmative syntheses are incorporated as matrices into the new text (e.g. Barth, Brautigan, Barthelme, Pynchon) in order to gain a plot, to build up suspense, and to hold the attention of the

reader who has been attuned to the formulaic narrative arguments by fiction, film, and TV. At the same time, these clichéd formulas are parodied, ironized, and mocked, for instance by reversing their pre-designed intention and formulas and by transforming them into complex games (the detective novel formula, for instance, does not begin with uncertainty and end with certainty but reverses the sequence, beginning with certainty and ending with uncertainty). This procedure is not only a critical act but is also used to vitalize the imagination. In a time of exhaustion and disbelief in formulas and regulated aesthetic systems, the author, so to speak through the backdoor, gets preformed materials and structures to work on and play with on different levels. By the exploitation of formulaic fiction, the aesthetic system is ironized and energized in order to avoid being stereotyped as a (modern) self-enveloping symbolic structure. The use of flat formulas, along with “the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape in the flattest possible diction” (Newman 156), is thus also a counter-strategy against aesthetic closure. What we see here at work, in fiction and painting, is the aesthetic operational paradox (vitalization of art through the flatness of formulas), based on the paradoxical ground figuration of the postmodern text and artwork, a paradox of which we will say more later.

The field of art is of course plural in its discourses, forms and functions. The interaction between the arts and the cultural environment has a decisive influence on the respective weight and prestige of the different media of art, all of which have their assets and their limitations. The relations among the various art disciplines can be hierarchical or accumulative; there are parallels and contrasts in their formal potential and their developmental cycle. Postmodernism effects some important changes in the respective accentuation and evaluation of the various art media. Just as the field of postmodern culture abandons its hierarchical design, the field of art abandons its hierarchical organization. Literature loses its privileged role in the realm of art, a dominance founded, according to Jaus, on its “*socially formative* function as it competes with the other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and social bonds” (45). Susan Sontag defines the “new sensibility” of the Sixties as a release of the senses from the mind; she speaks of the removal of literature, with its “heavy burden of

‘content,’ both reportage and moral judgment”, from its preeminent place by those arts that have “much less content and a much cooler mode of moral judgment —like music, films, dance, architecture, painting, sculpture”, “all of which draw profoundly, naturally, and without embarrassment, upon science and technology” (298-99). The idea is that the talented young people turn away from the written word and go into film, politics, music, and that, conversely, “those who did write novels simply turned away from the gaudy carnival of contemporary life, as Tom Wolfe said in *The New Journalism*, ‘gave up by default,’ leaving the way clear for the hip new journalists and rhetoricians. According to Wolfe, novelists became ‘Neo-Fabulists’ entranced by myth and parable understandable only to themselves, and lost interest in reality”(Dickstein 91).

All this is true and yet not so true. Even though the postmodern novel of the Sixties does not focus on changes in morals and manners, and thus for some critics seems “irrelevant”, its “heavy content” of course has also something to do with the social and cultural condition from which it springs. One might even consider the possibility that literature, precisely because of its “heavy burden of content”, whatever that is in each particular case, has been less in danger of exhaustion than have parts of the visual arts, for instance painting and sculpture, whose formal features can be more easily isolated and exhausted and are therefore more subject to modish change than are those of fiction. Gass writes: “Language, unlike any other medium, I think, is the very instrument and organ of the mind. It is not the representation of thought, as Plato believed, and hence only an inadequate copy; but it is thought itself. [...] Literature is mostly made of mind; and unless that is understood about it, little is understood about it” (1996, 36). From hindsight one recognizes that fiction by no means was on the defensive in the culture at large in the Sixties, that, as we will argue later, the dominance of the “less heavy” media in fact called for a counterweight that only literature could provide. As Dickstein notes, “the Sixties are as likely to be remembered through novels as through anything else they left behind” (92).

What deteriorated, however, in contrast to the novel as art, was the prestige of the novel as medium of social criticism — though, conversely, the prestige of the novel was used to heighten journalistic documentation, not only later by Wolfe himself (*Bonfire*

of the *Vanities*, 1987), but also in the documentary novel of Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*, 1966), Norman Mailer (*Armies of the Night*, 1968, and several other novels), and William Styron (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1967). Yet viewed another way, this border crossing between novel and documentation appears to be the attempt to revitalize the novel by including documented sociology. The goal of this strategy, replenishment of fiction, is vaguely comparable to the postmodern writers' attempt at replenishment of narrative by having recourse to popular fiction formulas. The premises and strategies of the two groups are of course completely different, the one turning more to "realism", the other more to "irrealism" (Barth) and radical formal experimentalism. Obviously, all of these quite different assumptions about the state of the novel and the influence of the social and cultural context on its status and form have some validity, and none can be excluded. This is a state of affairs that again demonstrates the complexity and uncertainty of the situation after the exhaustion of the high modernist ideology of art.

But even the mentioned writers of documentary novels were in fact less interested in writing good sociology than in the psychological aspects of what happened or, rather, the complexities, uncertainties and inexplicables of the human condition and the mystery of the human mind and heart (as also were writers like Bellow, Malamud, Roth and Updike). This leads in the best of the documentary-style novels to the inclusion of certain postmodern traits in attitude and (multi)perspective. Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, actually one of the best novels of the Sixties, is an example of how a political event, the pacifist march on the Pentagon in 1967 and the issues involved in it, can be framed with, and complicated by, a number of contradictory perspectives, including the epistemological and linguistic problem of how to represent "facts". The author, being both a participant of the march and the narrator of the book, uses the personal viewpoint, the problem of personal identity, the complex web of personal relationships and entanglements, and the subtle shades of consciousness, together with the issue of representation (the imaginative narrative is more true than the supposedly truthful and realistic journalistic reportage) to complicate the mere political aspect of the march and its preparations by reflections, doubts, and speculations. Quite generally speaking, the so-called realistic novel was successful, even though, or perhaps because, it was apolitical.

John Updike recalled in an interview of 1971, at the publication of his *Rabbit Redux*: “We didn’t much think of politics. We were much more concerned with the private destiny that shaped people”, and he affirms his older tenet: “you introduce topical material into the novel at your own peril. I am convinced that a life of a nation is reflected, or distorted, by private people and their minute concerns” (qtd. in Dickstein 93-94).

The modern novel, on the other hand, had exhausted, in Barry Hannah’s words, “the ambitious grandness [of] Wolfe and Henry Miller and Faulkner that the contemporary mind simply does not want to face” (Vanarsdall 338), and the “high” themes of “love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 361), as well as the elevated existential tone, and now had come to emphasize the everyday concerns of ordinary people in a matter-of-fact language. There was not left much space for innovation. When the subject of the novel is no longer the “large” I of the metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical tradition of universal unity but the “small” or “weak” I that endeavors to integrate the private and social aspects of the person in a leveling and at the same time partialized world, and when narrative form and language are no longer objects of experimentation, because the paradigms of the traditional and the modern novel have been used up, the novel is in for repetition and for competition from other media. It is in for repetition because the everyday concerns of people and the habitual narrative strategies are apt to repeat themselves, and, becoming clichéd, can scarcely create the crucial difference that creates unique (depth or essentialist) meaning; it is in for competition because newspapers, magazines and the electronic media have taken over the task of social information and analysis. Thus the postmodern change of the premises and strategies of fiction answered to signs of exhaustion in the novel and to the new distribution of roles in the communication system of society.

### **2.3. The Art Series: Parody, Irony, and the Transformation of the Artistic Tradition**

Confirmation and subversion, endorsement, and resistance characterize the whole aesthetic scene in postmodernism — and not only in postmodernism. Resistance can be understood in Foucault’s



terms, varying Hegel's concept of dialectics, as part of the power game, as "the odd term in relations of power[;] they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite" (1976, 96). The antithesis of confirmation and subversion (resistance) defines at least three aesthetic domains. First, as already mentioned, it plays its part within the text. Within the pattern of the single text, contradictory discourses serve the two different intentions of reflecting and subverting the power structures of the external world. Second, as we noted before, this antithesis designates the relation between the system of art, which, in Gass's pointed formulation, "counts as a cultural surplus" and has "no occasion, no external justification" (1985, 194), and its socio-cultural context, which of course does not disappear since the text's created world is "always a metaphorical model of our own" (1970, 60). Reflection/confirmation and subversion/resistance take on the form of affirming and transgressing the borderlines between art and the cultural environment. Third, endorsement and resistance mark the relationship between author/text and the *art tradition*, i.e., the art concepts in general and the specific conventions and rules of the respective art discipline in particular. Author and text endorse, vary, or rebel against the authority and control mechanisms of preset rules and the underlying ideology of art, following the fundamental human drives of repetition and innovation. The postmodern position grows out of a dynamic interaction of all three antithetical versions of confirmation and subversion mentioned (discourses within the text, art and environment, and artwork and art tradition). Here we concentrate on the relation between text and artistic tradition.

Art as a concept and the various disciplines into which it unfolds relate not only to the socio-cultural context but also follow their own laws, which partly run parallel and partly, differ among themselves. The immanent laws of literature and the visual arts are semi-autonomous, yet they are also similar in their intention and function as art. These intrinsic rules of art and its disciplines direct the evolution of artistic forms and devices, and establish the pattern of the artistic *series*, the inherent cycle of the New, the cycle of the beginning, maturing, and decaying of concepts and strategies, though of course one kind of painting, music, fiction never fully abolishes another kind. There is always the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous; only the dominants change. The flow of time works in

two seemingly contradictory ways: towards self-organization and culmination of the one model *and* then towards its self-criticism and self-destruction, though the paradigm does not just disappear after it has become a dead end, but still leaves indications about what follows, since every phase of art, just as every phase of life, adds to our stock of ideas, options, strategies in the attempt to cope with art and life. To set the phenomenon of the literary series or cycle in a wider context we may refer to Thomas Kuhn's description of scientific revolution (in his aforementioned *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), as the change of paradigms, and note his observation that scientific paradigms after they have become inadequate are replaced by new ones that are more adequate than their predecessors in the representation of reality; and we may also turn to chaos theory or complexity theory that Barth in his Stuttgart lectures applies to "the way many people live" and to literary phenomena like plot. Here, Prigogine's branch of the chaos theory that concerns itself with self-organizing systems is not relevant, but rather what Barth, quoting Per Bak and Kan Chen, emphasizes, namely "*self-organized criticality*", the fact that "interactive systems may not only organize themselves into being but 'organize themselves into a critical state,'" that in fact "many composite systems [...] naturally evolve to a critical state" (1995, 338). The literary series is such a composite system or paradigm that naturally evolves to a critical state. The crisis manifests itself, as the Russian Formalists have maintained, in (self-critical) parody of the old, before one paradigm or composite system is replaced by another.

The literary paradigm develops towards the critical state in two ways. One evolves from the fear of repetition; it leads to *differentiation*, the growth of complexity and subtlety, and finally, in the process of sophistication, to the exhaustion of the inherent possibilities of the paradigm by the ever-present demands of innovation, of the new, of radicalizing themes and means of expression, of increasing the intricacy of issues and forms. The other cause of decay is, conversely, *repetition*, the inevitable process of automatization and stylization (for instance of the modern ideology of art, of its ground theme, alienation, and of the symbolic method of establishing meaning — the exhaustion of all three contribute to the rise of postmodern art). The Russian Formalists paid special attention to this logic of automatism in the scheme of literary evolution that

they were particularly interested in. Jakobson/Tynjanov mention in their theses of 1928 the literary “series” and “other series”, and Boris Eikhenbaum speaks of “the literary movement as such” (qtd. in Ehrlich 1981, 92). The catalysts of literary change are seen to be stylization and parody of the conventional and the used-up. Of course, the stages and manners in which the circle of growth, decay, and renewal takes place may differ within the various art media, since all artistic disciplines have their own immanent laws and do not necessarily hold to the same temporal sequence of innovation and exhaustion nor treat them in the same way. Twentieth century painting and fiction, for instance, follow a different chronological order in the historical sequence they establish of (pictorial and narrative) representation and anti-representation (abstraction), in the combination or new definition of abstraction and concretization and the new strategic orientation in general: painting reaching the stage of abstraction early in the twentieth century, fiction, as far as one can speak of abstraction in literature, late in the century, as we shall demonstrate in more detail later.

Postmodern fiction as part of the art cycle is obviously the late phase of the narrative series beginning with modernism (or romanticism). Following the idea that cycles of art complete and exhaust themselves but also begin new ones, three views of postmodern aesthetics are possible. Either postmodern art appears to begin a new cycle after the exhaustion of modernism, or, conversely, it can be seen as completing and exhausting aesthetic modernism. Or postmodern art begins something new *within* the great modern tradition; in this case exhaustion and beginning anew are the two sides of the same thing, are complementary, which, however, says nothing about which side will finally win out, exhaustion or replenishment. In fact all three views appear to be possible, depending on which text is analyzed and which view is taken — another example of postmodern perspectivism. Since, as Adorno and Lyotard have maintained, criticism of positions can only take place in the terms and language of the target criticized and thus is always affected by that which it criticizes, postmodern writers and texts are significantly influenced by the modern artistic ideas and strategies against which they revolt, for instance by the high evaluation of form, though the postmodernists add force to form, chaos to structure. The way the two are combined distinguishes the

postmodern writers from one another (see below the discussion of the narrated situation as frame). Barth calls himself a “romantic formalist” (1995, 326), and Gass believes that “the artist’s fundamental loyalty must be to form”, and that his or her “aim is to make something supremely worthwhile, to make something inherently valuable in itself”, and he is “happy this is an old-fashioned view” (1996, 35).

The blending of modern and postmodern features leads to a double-coding of the text, to transitions between modernism and postmodernism, the superimposition of their viewpoints and strategies. Barth, for example, calls his collection of short stories, *Lost in the Funhouse*, generally taken as a model exercise in postmodernism, “late-modernist marvels” (1984, 203). Yet, generally speaking, he considers himself “as one of the few ‘Postmodernist’ writers who uncomplainingly accept that designation” (1995, 277). The labeling process is complex, the more so since every writer has different ideas about his place in the historical process and does not like to be classified anyway, cherishing his or her uniqueness. Gass calls any number of otherwise designated postmodernists, including Calvino, Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Hawkes, and himself, late-Modernists, while Barth calls them Postmodernists (1995, 295, 122). And in fact, one can read certain postmodern texts in both a modern and a postmodern way. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, for instance, the central text of literary postmodernism, is in many ways double-coded. A “modern” reading of the novel makes visible the horizon of alienation, disillusionment, and pain, as well as the quest for identity, the attempt at formal design, at a vision of the whole, and an aesthetic of negativity in Adorno’s sense, emphasizing the autonomy of art and its necessary freedom from all extraneous influences — all of which serve to temper the postmodern eclecticism in theme, the dissolution of the subject, the dissemination of meaning, the play with theme and character, form and composition, and the perspectives of radical irony and the comic mode.

Insofar as postmodern aesthetic ideology entails a “liberation” of fiction from exhausted traditions, it also brings about an “emancipation” of the reader of fiction from the conventional and the used-to and the chronological sequence, in favor of the simultaneous and non-synchronous. Postmodern perspectivism in terms of reader reception means that *every* text can be read in a

number of ways. One may indeed not only recognize modern features in postmodern texts but also receive modern texts in a postmodern vein. Reading modernist texts in a postmodern way would imply shifting attention from the unity of form (which, according to the early Lukács, is the “ersatz for God”) to the cracks in the modern formal structures and the incongruities in the evaluating perspectives, and recognizing — for instance in Joyce’s or Beckett’s strategies, especially their comic mode, or in Faulkner’s concept of history in *Absalom, Absalom!* — a precarious advancing of the modern program of awareness and its “vision of the whole” (Spender) towards the breaking-point, in anticipation of the postmodern concern with deconstructive and pluralistic viewpoints and techniques. Residing within the depth and scope of modern awareness and truth, within the wholeness of aesthetic form, one can see hidden, or not so hidden, the explosive “anti-aesthetic”, dissociative force of chaos, which rends form apart when the latter attempts to encompass in its structure the widest possible range and greatest intensity of the ambiguities and contrarities of human existence and thought. Ihab Hassan has done much to establish a connection between the American experiments of the Sixties and the avantgarde of European modernism in order to constitute an a-chronological, typological view of postmodernism: “The postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism. [...] It is not really a matter of chronology: Sade, Jarry, Breton, Kafka acknowledge that spirit” (1982, 139).

The question is, how postmodern art, being the late stage of a developmental series, finds its place in the literary cycle, both relating to the old and producing something new. This is the subject of John Barth’s early diagnosis of the situation of contemporary art. The “renaissance” of fiction (Coover in LeClair and McCaffery 65) at such a late stage of a literary series puts the writer, according to Barth, in a paradoxical situation and demands from him or her a new balance between repetition and innovation, exhaustion and replenishment, expectation and surprise: “An artist should be aware of the effects that have been wrought in his genre and of the kinds of things that have been said so that he will appreciate the problems of saying anything freshly and originally at this late hour. [...] This catches him in something of a paradox: the more he knows, the better an artist he can theoretically become, and yet the knowledge he

acquires is overwhelming — it places him in competition with the accumulated best of human history”. However, there is no choice but “to confront the complexity, [...] and decide you are by no means paralyzed by that confrontation”, “in spite of the apocalyptic feeling that we all have about America at the moment [1971]” (Gado 138, 118). In a by now famous essay of 1967, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (complemented twelve years later with the essay “The Literature of Replenishment”, which was to clear up some misunderstandings that the first article had allegedly caused), Barth says that staying creative in literature and the arts means to aestheticize further the already aestheticized material of art and environment. It is a matter of countering “the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities” (1984, 64), and he points to Borges as a model whose “aesthetic victory [...] is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (69-70). The transfer of the used-up, the conventional and the fixed into ever new, non-stereotyped, and flexible imaginary configurations is attained not so much by the innovation of new forms, though now form is extended to include anti-form, as by the activation of comprehensive, relativizing *attitudes*, by parody, irony, and the comic mode. The method of parody is “to try to abstract the pattern [...] to follow the pattern” and by following it “to parody the pattern” (Bellamy 1974, 13); the strategy of irony is labyrinthine, for “[a] labyrinth, after all, is a place in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction in this case) are embodied, and [...] must be exhausted [by a host of ironic reversals] before one reaches the heart” (Barth 1984, 82); the “free” comic mode of the postmodern text creates a ridiculous simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

In this historical shift, each of the arts, facing exhaustion, periodically makes an effort to reach back to the archetypal sources of its energy and the primal techniques of its genre: in the case of fiction it is “plain” narrative, in the case of painting the representation of a pictorial world. In both cases the attempt is made to foreground the sheer procedural (and chaotic or random) energy of creation without the control of regulating form, though the text, by following a definite deconstructive theory, as it were, takes on its own form, even if it is a “theoretical” form. For the appreciation and understanding of the theoretical form of this art, it is of course

necessary to know the theory and recognize it in its manifestation (Federman, Sukenick; minimalistic and conceptual visual art). Postmodern fiction integrates and plays with the idea of the end of art (of the current paradigm of art), as well as with the return to the sources of narrative energy. It carries out the return to primal story telling in a kind of self-parody, the author realizing that at this late stage of history a “naive” state of mind cannot exist on its own but has to be expressed in a more complex, post-innocent frame of self-consciousness or self-irony or both. We will give two examples, Barth and Barthelme, the one a “maximalist”, the other a “minimalist”.

For Barth “simple” storytelling belongs to the past; it can appear in literary fiction only in a multi-layered composition such as he provides in stories like “Lost in the Funhouse”, “Menelaiad” or “Anonymiad”, from the collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, or “Dunyazadiad” from *Chimera* —all are framed by discourses of self-reflection, doubt, criticism, analysis of the current process of writing. The fear that art has exhausted itself is confronted with reflections on the possibility of its replenishment. Barth writes in “Bellerophoniad” (*Chimera*) self-consciously and self-critically: “How does one write a novella? How find the channel, bewildered in these creeks and crannies? Storytelling is not my cup of wine; isn’t somebody’s; my plot doesn’t rise and fall in meaningful stages but winds upon itself [...]: digresses, retreats, hesitates, groans from its utter et cetera, collapses, dies” (CH 205); or he notes in “Life Story”: “Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum! Who doesn’t prefer art that at least overtly imitates something other than its own processes?” (LF 114) In “Dunyazadiad”, the suddenly appearing genie, representing in his utterances the problems of the contemporary writer, sees a solution only in a paradoxical procedure: to go beyond his past performances “toward a future they were not attuned to and, by some magic, at the same time go back to the original springs of narrative” (CH 17). This means for Barth to return to the earliest myths and legends, whose patterns, derived from Greek mythology or books like *The 1001 Nights*, are then consciously transformed into multi-layered schemes, indeed attuned to both the past and the future by the ironic attitude of the artistic discourse (See also Calvino 1975).

Barthelme is another example of this self-reflexive concern with art. In *Snow White*, one of the dwarfs raises the crucial question whether postmodern fiction is serious enough about human problems outside the aesthetic realm; he thus touches on the ethics-vs.-aesthetics issue that has accompanied the critical evaluation of postmodern fiction from the beginning. Kevin counters his own doubts by referring to the postmodern epistemological and ontological uncertainties, to his own disillusionment with both the distortions of subjectivity and the didactic formalism, as well as to the adversary ethos of modern high culture and art in general:

‘There is not enough seriousness in what we do,’ Kevin said. ‘Everyone wanders around having his own individual perceptions. These, like balls of different colors and shapes and sizes, roll around on the green billiard table of consciousness ...’ Kevin stopped and began again. ‘Where is the figure in the carpet? Or is it just ...carpet?’ he asked. ‘Where is -’ ‘You’re talking a lot of buffalo hump, you know that,’ Hubert said. Hubert walked away. Kevin stood there (*SW* 129).

Kevin stands there not knowing, uncertain. Barthelme’s answer to the question of how to represent uncertainty, together with the loss of substance and the increase of waste, is quite different from Barth’s and marks the other method of postmodern fiction, or rather the other pole of *irrealism* or the *fantastic* (which is the quintessence of postmodern fiction in general and to which we will devote an extra section): not to re-make and re-vitalize the used-up and clichéd material and form by foregrounding an attitude of irony and parody and the return to the sources, but rather to include “debris” into the “design” (Hawkes), and to “have a lot of *dreck* in them [the books], matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of ‘sense’ of what is going on” (*SW* 106). “Dreck”, waste or debris are here the terms that denote the adversaries of significant form, the used-up, the insignificant, meaningless, and superfluous, which, however, considering the large consequences that the initial (waste) condition always has, have to be made use of as indeed significant; in fact, the dwarf observes, we are now “at such a point [...] the question turns from the question of disposing of this ‘trash’ to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it’s 100 percent” (*SW* 97).



The terms of significance have obviously changed in postmodern fiction: linearity, linear causality, and qualitative difference lose much of their impact (as far as that is possible in narrative, which is time-bound) in the orderly “descent” into disorder or arbitrariness. Of course it would have been possible to compensate the decline of temporality with (modern) “spatial” arrangements, with the foregrounding of meaning-building simultaneity, methods important for what Sharon Spencer calls the modern “architectonic novel”, which is a “spatial” novel. But the composite arrangements of the postmodern New Fiction do not establish a “spatial”, or structural order either; they do not construct a rationalizable or meaningful equilibrium. Symmetry and asymmetry are often indistinguishable, and parts can neither be analyzed separately nor designated as signifying parts of a definable whole; and yet a “message” clearly comes through, which creates its own, non-organic form: namely, that order includes disorder or randomness, and order evolves spontaneously from disorder and chaotic conditions of randomness (see Prigogine’s chaos theory). In Barthelme’s words from “The Dolt”, one of the results of both multiplicity and the “trash phenomenon” is that “[e]ndings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin” (*Sixty Stories*); Barth, however, notes: “Beginnings are exciting; middles are gratifying; but endings, boyoboy” (*OwS* 222). The individual strategies of narrative may be different, yet what Barthelme, Barth, and all the other postmodern writers practice is the abandonment of the apparently no longer relevant concepts of essence and uniqueness and hierarchic order, and their replacement by the notions of pluralism and “perspectivism” (Nietzsche), which, however, not only relativize the concepts of order but also those of chaos. In the words from *Snow White*: “But my main point is that you should bear in mind multiplicity, and forget about uniqueness” (*SW* 75). Both Barthelme’s “trash phenomenon”, and the “‘endless’ quality” (*SW* 96) of multiplicity signal (playfully) the end of aesthetic integration and centered structure — in the sense that all loose ends are finally assembled into a meaningful whole — and thus implicitly refer to exhaustion (of the modern art concept), to the end-of-art theme from *within* the text, while, on the other hand, the text as gestalt/nongestalt constantly calls up the ideas of order and form, of integrative art. The modern idea of organic form functions as a kind of “minus function”

(Lotman). Theoretical reflections of the writers about art outside the fictional text take up this end-of-art theme by raising doubts not about the form problem but about the *function* of art in a culture where the claims of art no longer go unchallenged and have to compete with other popular (“trash”) forms of communication, information, and analysis and their demands on society. Gass claims, arguing in fact from a modernist aesthetic viewpoint, that “[a]rt seems the only objective thing left whose value can be reasonably justified”, only to add, however, in a postmodern manner, “but I have great skepticism even about that in my wiser days”.

If postmodernism entails both the disruption and continuation of modernism, it is obviously disruption that comes first. This brings us to a final point: deconstruction and liberation obviously find their ultimate limit only in *extremes* and in *excess*, and it is only in the two that they fulfill themselves and prepare for a new beginning. But these extremes are different from the modernist ones. While between the wars, “boundary situations” (Jaspers) and states of emergency or exception were made into a logic of the extreme (Carl Schmitt, Lukács, Heidegger, Benjamin, Bloch, Bataille) and determined the literature of alienation in general and the situation of the fictional character in particular (Hemingway, Faulkner, and a host of others), they are shunned now, in the latter part of the century, together with essentialist views of identity, or they are relativized or ironized, framed by other (epistemological and ontological) concerns, as are the paranoiac characters in Pynchon’s novels. Extreme psychological situations are no longer the crucial theme of the postmodern novel. They scarcely can any longer offer veritable possibilities of experiencing the authentic or the true, for the character is seen to be a composite of roles or “stories”, living in “a large number of fragmentary possible worlds” (Foucault 1970, 183). Barth says in *The End of the Road* with regard to character: “the same life lends itself to any number of stories” (*ER* 5); and he repeats the idea in an interview: “I’ve always been impressed by the multiplicity of people that one has in one” (Prince 57). In fact, in contrast to the psychologically extreme, the ordinary is revived (Barthelme, Elkin), the ordinary, however, just like the psychological, transformed into the fantastic, which demonstrates that the extreme in postmodern fiction is a matter of artistry, of method, not one of inner life and of the conceived fictionality of the

real that art reflects (see the sections on the fantastic and the ordinary). Gass calls himself a “Methodologist (my term for my type)”, and to his type belong most of the postmodern writers, even if they stress the role of chaos in their fiction (see below), because, in Hawkes’s terms, debris and design belong together. Gass writes: “A Methodologist (for whom the medium is the muse) will reformulate traditional aesthetic problems in terms of language” (1996, 50-51), and, Barth demands, “regard fiction as artifice in the first place” (Bellamy 1974,15), postmodern concepts of art which lead to a mode of fiction that Barth calls “irrealism”.

The extremes and excesses in postmodern fiction thus do not generally concern the character, or they relate to the character in a way that the uncertainty of the outer *situation* that the character faces is extreme and leads to paranoia, as in Pynchon’s novels, which is different from the test of character in boundary situations, as for instance in Hemingway. In the rivalry between situation and character, as we will argue later, the situation wins, not the character, which is dispersed. The excess in postmodern narrative is generally not determined by the excess of sorrow, grief, inner unfulfillment, loss of identity, though these plays a role too, especially in Pynchon, but by an aesthetic excess, an excess at the borderline of the aesthetically possible, on the edge of intelligibility. The nonsensicality of the performance right on or beyond the edge of intelligibility eliminates the full seriousness that modernist fiction cannot do without because of the dominance of the alienation theme (with the partial exception of Joyce, Kafka and Faulkner, who also use the comic view as an additional perspective). The function of fiction where it appears to become art for art’s or nonart’s sake is obviously not only to shock a bourgeois audience, which has been accustomed to radical experiments by modernism anyway, but to push experimentalism to the *end of the road*. As mentioned, experiments are increasingly defined by theory, which is then set into practice. Such a theory of excess is what Sukenick calls “the Bossa Nova, an elaboration of the new tradition. Needless to say the Bossa Nova has no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence, no verisimilitude, no imitation, no allegory, no symbolism, no subject matter, no ‘meaning’” (1975b, 43). Abish, Sorrentino, Barthelme, Burroughs, and Federman may here exemplify the play with the utter extreme of narrative experiment.

Abish's linguistic tour de force, *Alphabetical Africa*, is an example of how the text can be overloaded with form at the expense of content. It follows in its composition a system deliberately set up by the author wherein the alphabet is the exclusive regulating principle of composition and is to be adhered to strictly in its own terms. Every word of the first chapter begins with the letter A; the second with A or B; the third with A, B, or C. At Z the process reverses: the final chapter has words again beginning with A. Abish, reflecting on *Alphabetical Africa* and, speaking for many of his colleagues, says: "Feeling a distrust of the understanding that is intrinsic to any communication, I decided to write a book in which my distrust became a determining factor upon which the flow of narrative was largely predicated" (cited on the dust jacket of the book). Similarly, in Sorrentino's *Splendide-Hotel*, the "haphazard" "shaping principle" (Sorrentino) of a number of meditations is again nothing but the alphabet. Barthelme, in a piece like "Sentence", again full of theoretical rigor, transfers the rationality of syntax into the irrationality of collage by spreading one sentence, without punctuation marks, over about nine pages, a procedure that, by leaving out the links by which we orient ourselves, disrupts communication already after half a page, forcing the reception process into a string of chance combinations. The reader, in Barthelme's words, is "bumping into something that is there, like a rock or a refrigerator" (1964, 15). Burroughs is even more rigid in the repulsion of control and the exploitation of chance and indeterminacy by making chance not only the reception but also the production principle. First in *The Exterminator* (1960), written with Brion Gysin, he combines the cut-up method with the collage principle, supposedly to release the mind from the oppressions of the rationalizing principles of society. In Burroughs's words: "take a page more or less of your own writing, or from any writer living or dead. Cut into sections with scissors or switchblade as preferred and rearrange the sections. Looking away. Now write out the result" (1962a, unpaginated).

Introducing a "new paginal (rather than grammatical) syntax", Federman and Sukenick extend the aesthetic of fiction into the immediate visual domain of the page, into the filling of its spaces, where, according to Federman, in order to emphasize the "deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, and

incoherent” character of the text, “the fiction writer can, at any time introduce material (quotations, pictures, diagrams, charts, designs, pieces of other discourses, doodles, etc.) totally unrelated to the story he is in the process of telling; or else, he can simply leave those spaces blank, because fiction is as much what is said as what is not said, since what is said is not necessarily true, and since what is said can always be said another way”. Thus “the real medium becomes the printed word as it is presented on the page, as it is perceived, heard, read, visualized (not abstractly but concretely) by the receiver”. Furthermore, in order to “renew our system of reading” and “give the reader a sense of free participation in the writing/reading process”, the receiver is set free, too, which is a way to equate randomness with order and to open multiple and simultaneous ways of reading. To this purpose, Federman comes to abandon the numeration of pages, and to suggest that the reader discard the consecutive, prearranged left-to-right and top-to-bottom way of reading, thus leaving the recipient with the choice of how to proceed, demanding that “the elements of the new fictitious discourse [...] will occur simultaneously and offer multiple possibilities of rearrangement in the process of reading” (1975, 10, 13, 12, 10, 9,11). The provocative “anti-narrative” procedures of Burroughs, Abish, Sorrentino, Federman, and Sukenick — who again speaks of “juxtaposition and manipulation of the print on the page” (1975b, 38) — reject the signals of communication and interpretation expected by the reader. It is important to note that Federman and the mentioned authors are “not alone in these wild imaginings. Many contemporary writers, each in his own personal ‘mad’ way, have already successfully created [this] kind of fiction” (Federman 1975, 14). These personal wild imaginings that Federman speaks of also include more narrowly narrative strategies; they generally open the text to the play with attitudes, positions and strategies, for instance in comic-apocalyptic novels (Heller, *Catch 22*, Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*), in the use of the systems theory and the abundant serial multiplication of plotlines in Barth’s *LETTERS*, or in Pynchon’s *V* the immense range of partial perspectives on the letter V or the adventure plot, and the multiplication of history.

It is interesting to note that these excesses on the edge of intelligibility in the end phase of the literary series are not only explained by aesthetic reasons, the exhaustion of the literary tradition

of which Barth and a host of other postmodern writers make so much, but also by analogy with the socio-cultural environment of which they are part. Philip Roth in a famous, much-quoted remark asserted that “the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (“Writing” 144). Similarly, Coover notes that “each single instant of the world is so impossibly complex[;] we cannot accumulate all the data needed for a complete, objective statement” (Gado 152). Don DeLillo says in an interview: “what’s been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality. [...] We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then” (DeCurtis 48). And Sukenick writes: “What we have now is a fiction of the impossible that thrives on its own impossibility, which is no more or less impossible these days than, say, city life, politics or peace between the sexes” (1975a, 8). Ishmael Reed for his part remarks in *Flight to Canada*: “Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy” (8). In Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* we read that the world of Demonia or Antiterra is “a distortive glass of our distorted globe” (25), and Abish declares, in addition to the afore-quoted remark about the problems of communication and understanding, that he predicates his novel *Alphabetical Africa* on the premise that “the innovative novel is, in essence, a novel of disfamiliarization, a novel that has ceased to concern itself with the mapping of the ‘familiar world’” (W. Martin 238). Finally, Vonnegut says that what is wrong with this world is “the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty” (Vonnegut, *Wampeters* 163). In fact, in driving the text towards the excess of order or disorder or both, postmodern fiction reconnects, via the dissolution or multiplication or excess of form, with the lifeworld and *its* excesses, excess being the link between the two, the extremities of fiction on the edge of intelligibility and the drastic excesses of public life — for instance the Red Scare and the Rosenberg case of the 1950s (Coover, *The Public Burning*); the wasteland and senseless violence of war

(Hawkes, *The Cannibal*; Heller, *Catch 22*; Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*); the Sixties youth activities, their illusionary peace and love slogans (Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*); the Cold War and computer technology (Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*), the white man's ideological deformation of history (Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*), and so on. Yet going right to the extreme has paradoxically not only a stifling, entropic but also a liberating, negentropic effect.

We have come to a point, where practically no taboos are left to be assaulted. The postmodern breakthrough in terms of new subject matter and new form/antiform reaches in the works of these authors its intrinsic limits. In the very extremity of Abish's, Sorrentino's, Burroughs's, Federman's or Sukenick's texts, or Barth's *LETTERS*, the subversive purpose of the avantgarde has come finally to subvert itself, which implies the end of the avantgarde but also the necessity to recast the novel, to find new molds for narrative, a new mixture of discourses and counter-discourses. It is important to note that this is *not* the task of a time after postmodernism, but that it is the very task that postmodern fiction itself faces after it has gone to the limit, farther than which there is no advancing; "there is", in Sukenick's words, "some indefinable line beyond which the art you are working in becomes some other art, or no art at all" (1975b, 39), a line which almost all the writers test in their own way before redefining their methods. This limit-testing is key to understanding of the New Fiction, which, having faced (already with Burroughs's cut-up method at the end of the Fifties and beginning of the Sixties) the ultimate edge of possibilities, where possibility turns into mere arbitrariness, has had to recast its discourses. Because of the communication problem in the intercourse with the reader, a problem that grows with the increase of complexity and multiplicity in the composition of the text, there is not much road left to go forward on after a certain point of randomness has been reached. But the road is open for unlimited *returns*, for "rebell[ing] along traditional lines", to use Barth's phrase (he speaks of "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" [1984, 79]), for arranging the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, for any amount of reversals of direction and replenishments on the way. The logical result is an *eclecticism* of a special kind, which not only takes up and combines already used and

still available subject matter and narrative methods but interprets them in the intellectual spirit of our time, in terms of *irony*, which, as we will see later, includes relativism and tolerance. In “Literature of Replenishment”, Barth creates an intellectual program out of tolerance for the other and the need to connect, to combine but also to redirect.

I deplore the artistic and critical cast of mind that repudiates the whole modernist enterprise as an aberration and sets to work as if it hadn't happened; that rushes back into the arms of nineteenth century middleclass realism as if the first half of the twentieth century hadn't 65 happened. [...] On the other hand, it is no longer necessary, if it ever was, to repudiate *them*, either: the great premodernists. If the modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral convention are not the whole story, then, from the perspective of these closing decades of our century we may appreciate that the contraries of those things are not the whole story either. [...] A worthy program for postmodern fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth century modernist parents or his premodernist grandparents. [...] The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrationalism, formalism and ‘contentism’, pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (1984, 202-203).

Many of the postmodern writers indeed practice a mixture of strategies. Richard Poirier has noted of Pynchon's protagonists that they perform on different levels (1971). They function in the power games, stand for an intellectual opinion or an attitude, but also have the capacity to surprise and develop, the way characters do in “realistic” (modern) novels. Resisting the power of the dehumanizing System of Authorities and its aggressive activities, these characters surprise and develop and turn into beings that approach E.M. Forster's “round” characters, with “modern” feelings of pain and alienation. The same is true of many of Barth's, Coover's, Elkin's, Gass's, Hawkes's central characters, or Heller's Yossarian in *Catch 22*. One excess is often countered by another excess, the insanity of the system, for instance, by the counter-insanity called paranoia. The excess of both allows for an ironizing variation of in-between perspectives, for a replenishment at “the end of the road” (the title of Barth's early novel).



#### **2.4. Intertextuality, the Creative Writer, and the Power-Resistance Paradigm**

All considerations of the status of art circle around the relationship between autonomy and dependency. The interrelations between individual texts, between the text and the cultural condition, between the text and the literary tradition can be summed up under the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a special kind of pluralism, pluralism of influences, pluralism of codes and discourses within the text, pluralism also in terms of the reader or, rather, the dialectic interrelation between text and reader. One important aspect of this pluralizing intertextuality is that it opens the way, as Roland Barthes argues, for overcoming the subject-object dichotomy in the reading process. To gain freedom for both text and reader and their interaction, Barthes decomposes and pluralizes both the concept of the object, i.e., the text — “[t]he more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it” (1974, 10), and the concept of the subject, the reader, whether as historical person or phenomenological construct. Just as the text is pluralized not only by the intention of the author but already by the plurality and diversity of determinate cultural and narrative codes that it participates in, the reader is pluralized by the knowledge of literary conventions and other texts, which make up the horizon of expectation and understanding; again in Barthes’s words: “This ‘I’ which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite, or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)” (1974, 10).

In its extreme form, the concept of intertextuality reduces the writer and the text (and the character) to meeting points of outside influences, and thus discontinues the author’s claims to independent authorship and autonomous status. This is a curtailment and transformation of the notion of creativity that, if this reduction of the importance of author intention is reasoned out with all consequences, leads to what has been called “the death of the author” (Foucault, Barthes). It leads also to the death of the text as a unique gestalt. Intertextuality regards text and artwork as so dependent on, and permeable to, influences from outside that it cannot claim authenticity as a singular work of art on its own terms. But this is not the whole truth. Since the text, whatever the mixture of its codes, is a

circumscribed gestalt on its own terms, too, there is in fact an antinomy between openness and closure of the text, an aesthetic condition which has productive potential for the imagination because of its doubleness, its "superimprinting one text on the other" (Derrida 1981, 26) and "dissemination" (1988a) of meaning. On the one hand, there are always other texts and contexts at the origin of every text; no text is self-contained; in Derrida's words: "A writing that refers back only to itself carries us at the same time, indefinitely and systematically to some other writing". On the other hand, the text exists only in and for itself: "It is necessary that while referring each time to another text, to another determinate system, each organism only refers to itself as a determinate structure" (1988a, 102). The same dialectic holds true for the author. Barthes on the one hand argues that a text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture". On the other hand, the author's "power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (1977, 146). Gass reflects this double position of the author as recipient and creator by making, in an early essay, the writer a god as to the range of his imagination and the openness of the text (1996, 36), while denying him this role as absolute "commanding creator", as god, in a later article (268).

The postmodern writer, for instance Barth, Pynchon, Sorrentino, and Sukenick, in fact plays with the tension between text and context, the closed aesthetic system of discourses and the open system exposed to the invading cultural codes, the influence from outside. They attempt to contain this tension or make it productive for the composition of the text and thus stay in control. There are at least four strategies for attaining this goal. They all transfer this dialectic of open and closed system, of invasion and containment, dependence and uniqueness, into the matrix of the text itself as the dialectic of certainty and uncertainty, power and resistance. The most simple strategy for keeping in control is to thematize intertextuality directly, to refer to other writers or philosophic traditions from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and to quote from, or allude to, their works and statements, thus frankly placing one's own text within the traditions of knowledge, not, however, without perspectivizing, ironizing and playing with them to the point of

parody. This imparts a double coding both on the quotes from other texts and the allusions to their ideas, as well as to one's own text and its argument. Postmodern fictional texts often are, in fact, "poignant but playful [...] spinoffs from notable scientific or philosophical propositions: Zeno's paradoxes, Schrödinger's wave-function equations, whatever" (Barth *OwS* 149). We will come back to this point in a special chapter.

A second way of opening the borderlines and keeping in control at the same time is to play with the communication system text, the interrelation between author, text, and reader, making them positions both within and without the text, the one invading the territory of the other. The author who should be outside his or her creation appears as a character within the text (Sukenick, *Up, Out*; Federman, *Double or Nothing, The Voice in the Closet*; Barth, *LETTERS*); or the fictional characters who should be within the text step outside to congratulate their author on his achievement (Sukenick, *Up*); or the reader who should start reading only after he has received the finished product appears within the text and reads it while it is in progress, as though from the inside view of a character; or the characters step over from an earlier text to a later one of their author after they have negotiated the terms under which they will allow the transfer. The author is now also a character within the text and writes letters to, and receives letters from, his former and by now again present protagonists (Barth, *LETTERS*); or the characters in a novel within a novel are aware of and dissatisfied with the role that their author has allotted them; they discuss the situation among themselves, deceive their author about their identity out of spite, and even think of leaving the novel for a better "job" (Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*).

The third case is more complicated in that the relationship between dependency and autonomy is made the central theme of the book. The social context and its discourses as the "other", the outside, the uncontrollable, are objectified as a powerful, intrusive, all-controlling Institution within the text. This method "borrows" material from the social environment, and, for instance, makes the allegedly all-determining, corrupting and exploitative Capitalist System, the great topic of the "crisis theorists", into a crucial issue of the text, albeit in an abstracted and demonized, dramatized and psychologized form which includes the *effect* of the power system on

people and their response and creates the dialectic matrix of (the System's) *power* and (the character's) *resistance* (cf. Pynchon, Coover, Hawkes, Sorrentino, Vonnegut, and others). This interaction has its own ineluctable logic and creates therefore a very strong design for a revival of plot (as something "plotted"), and for the constitution of character as both alienated and resistant, since, to refer to Foucault again, power by inner necessity calls up resistance, in fact would not exist without resistance, which is its other side or alter ego. This dialectic of power and resistance can be radicalized in global terms as anticipation of apocalypse or entropy, and in psychological terms as paranoia — paralleled in the lifeworld by the experience of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the threat of the atomic bomb, and the vision of the impending end of the world, all basic, determining components of the postwar period's zeitgeist. Though these feelings may again be played with and ironized, they bring into the texts the issues of anxiety and pain, loss and death, the existential underside of postmodern fiction, its open depth dimension under the surface of inventions. Mailer writes in "The White Negro", "our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war"(243); and Alfred Kazin (in his *The Bright Book of Life*) maintains that what Heller, Pynchon, Vonnegut, and others of the postwar period are really writing about, even though their locale is Germany, World War II, New York, or California, is the hidden history of the time, the threatening apocalypse, the "Next War", "a war that will be without limits and without meaning, a war that will end when no one is alive to fight it"(qtd. in Howard 265). Yet in spite of all this seriousness, by choosing, imparting, and changing the perspectives on the theme, by keeping the balance between power and resistance, uncertainty and certainty, the artist (who thus comes into existence after all) asserts his or her dominance over theme and form.

Since life cannot be thought of without a depth view — if nothing else death supplies the empty spot below the surface — the fourth way to give the text its own uniqueness, while acknowledging its dependence on the discourses of the time, is to build up another dialectic, that between surface and depth. Even if the surface phenomena of the narrative argument are influenced or determined by the socio-cultural condition and its discourses, the depth view can be, as it were, the anchor of the text. It can take on this function

because it is no longer defined in ideological terms that are transferred or transferable from outside, as an essence, a center, a center of the universe or the self, or an essentializing form, but is couched in uncertainty, appears “under erasure”, to use Derrida’s term that he takes from Heidegger and that denotes the paradoxical state of something present in absence. This complex and confusing presence-absence relationship is the anthropological foundation of the postmodern paradoxical worldview, which, by dramatizing the tension between being and nonbeing, presence and absence, surface and void, the text and the blank, establishes the basic operational configuration of postmodern fiction, the paradox. The paradoxical formation of the fundamentals of the human condition marks the unstable and contradictory state of knowledge, the fluid status of the created world, the relation between outside and inside, and thus also the problem of intertextuality. The aesthetic of the paradox, its expansion into the overall compositional principle of the text, make it possible to designate in antithetical formations the contradictions and basic uncertainties of the time, including the textual ones, without getting captured in the dilemma of modernist fiction, i.e., being caught in, and finally restricted to, the by now clichéd theme of alienation, whose extreme domination does not allow a wider spread of perspectives and enforces a by now heavily contested, essentializing concept of identity, an utter seriousness of tone, and the traditional and pre-formed structure of the quest (exceptions only confirming the rule).

This postmodern paradox is a special kind of figuration, since it does not allow, as the modernist paradox still does, any kind of synthesis and resolution, not even personal awareness as subjective resolution, and embraces the gap, the void as indissoluble “middle” part between the two segments, the contradictory positions of the paradox. The void and the gap may be covered by the flood of inventions but cannot be relinquished; they are always there, but only latently there; in fact “the void”, as it were, lies “[o]n the other side of a novel” (Gass 1970, 49). This is a very stimulating constellation. Since the depth view is kept open, open for multiple perspectives, even for play, irony and the comic mode (without losing its existential weight), it does not dominate everything else, but leaves the author a remarkable freedom of range, of roaming widely. Such a constellation means that the inventive games on the surface are not

determined by one-sided, finally stultifying (modernist) concepts of essence, truth, identity, and art. Yet it also means that, though the liberated space of energetics of the postmodern text transcends the ground-situation of the modernist text, i.e., the feeling of alienation, loss and disorientation by the play of the artifice, it *cannot* finally overcome the feeling of defamiliarization and estrangement. They are elementary aspects of being in the world — a circumstance that underlines the discontinuity/continuity relationship between postmodernism and modernism. In postmodern fiction, this psychological alienation theme is fused with an “internal”, textual alienation issue, a problem of “hostile” intertextuality that concerns the fictional existence of the narrator or character. They fear for their “reality” status within the text, the narrator being unsure if he is “really” the narrator, the creator of his world, or if he himself is again being narrated, together with his narrated world, by another narrator, while this second narrator may again be narrated by a third one, and so on *ad infinitum* (Borges, “The Circular Ruin;” Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*).

This is an aesthetic of *complexity*, of the *paradox* and the *gap*, which in its dissemination of meaning, its contradictions and absences — beyond all conventions and influences and beyond all creative assertions of independence and innovation — ultimately aims at representing the unrepresentable, the *ineffable*, where power and resistance meet. There are obviously two fundamentally different ways to respond to the ineffable in the human condition. They are represented by the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. While Cassirer assigned philosophy the task of dealing with the results of the sciences — or rather the various frameworks of knowledge — and of inquiring after their cultural unity, Heidegger aimed at problems, which would never be answered by any of the sciences, because concepts like truth, freedom and eternity exhibit the limitation of human understanding. Literature chooses one of the two approaches. Even though there are fundamental differences between philosophy and art, it is true, as Gass notes, that “the principles that govern constructions are persistently philosophical”, and that “no novel [is]without its assumptions” (1970, 17, 23). Under these premises, but with all necessary reservations and the knowledge that there are no clear-cut boundaries in fiction, one might assign the more traditional authors like Bellow, Malamud,

Updike, Roth, and others, to the tradition of Cassirer (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*), and the postmodern writers to Heidegger's approach to the basic human problems in *Being and Time* (we remember the interpretation of postmodern art in Heidegger's terms by Spanos and others in the Sixties). Postmodern fiction, however, adds to the existential stance its disbelief in rationalism and progress, in the conciliation of antitheses by culture, and in idealistic positions in general, the belief in the freedom of the imaginary, of perspective and play, which modify the fundamentals of existentialism considerably and give them a different tone (more about this point later).

Finally, we need to refer to Derrida's concept of literature as force, as energy without borderlines, a notion that practically suspends the concept of literature as a specific type of text. Since every text opens itself to the other text, also the non-literary text, literature for Derrida loses its boundaries as an aesthetic system of its own: "there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary being or being literary of literature" (1988a, 102). Literature and art in this view have no fixed sites; on the contrary, literature and art are self-reflexively situated in an in-between, as a force that is able and is meant to energize all the other (sterile) discourses. This may be considered an example of deconstructionist extremism that has no great practical consequences though it has the charm and stimulating power of absoluteness. But the deconstruction of centralized structures and the "abstraction" of the literary quality from the static text and its concretization as force, as the flow of stimulating energy, vitalizing whatever it comes in contact with, including the deconstructed/reconstructed literary text itself, goes a long way to explain some of the extreme postmodern experiments, especially those of Burroughs, Sukenick, and Federman, who try to deconstruct whatever could be constructed into a system with a rationalizable structure and definable borderlines, and to reconstruct the text as a flow of energy, including the discontinuous, the irrational, the uncontrollable, the gap, and the empty (white) space, in short, the arbitrary and chaotic, a procedure which attempts to suspend both socio-cultural, intertextual influences and the ego of the author in favor of a representation of anonymous force, an analog of the Life force.

## 2.5. Concepts of Aesthetics and the Opposition between Modernism and Postmodernism

In our study the most comprehensive frame of reference is aesthetics and the change of its concepts in history. Since aesthetics has been one of the most versatile terms in philosophy, a short overview of its conceptualizations may serve to place postmodern aesthetics in historical perspective. Though the theory of art is much older, the word “aesthetics” was introduced in the eighteenth century by Alexander Baumgarten (*Reflections on Poetry*, 1734; *Aesthetica*, 2. vols. 1750, 1758). Aesthetics for him was “sensitive knowledge”, the “*cognitio sensitiva perfecta*”, a meaning that Kant in some ways relied on and that lately has been stressed again by Greimas (1987). Since its advent as a separate philosophical discipline in the eighteenth century and especially since the appearance of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, aesthetics has attributed to literature and the arts a decisive epistemological and social role. Disagreement over the exact nature of this role, however, has been the source of the ongoing and heated debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism over the last two hundred years. The question is whether literature and the arts constitute an absolute category or are historically relative, whether they represent universal truth or the changing concerns and interests of society, and whether they express the essence of the human being or the contingencies and struggles of historical existence.

Horace’s idea that literature is useful *and* pleasurable to the reader receives its most fundamental variation and problematization in the essentialism of Romanticism, which emphasizes concepts of wholeness, permanence, truth, and the universality of Being, as opposed to rational truth, morality, usefulness, geniality, and elegance of style. The view that literature represents the essence of life and history originates from the Romantic conviction that the imagination is the highest human faculty of creation and synthesis,<sup>9</sup> and that the arts are the foremost expressive modes of the imagination. The essentialist concept of literature and the arts has two aspects: one universal and one historical. Literature is a *universal* phenomenon in that it exists in every period and every society; relating to the core of life; it represents the universal laws of nature and human existence. Literature is also universal in *historical*



terms inasmuch as its appearance and its function differ according to time and society; but still reflect the essences of the phases of history and of national identities and their development. The first crisis in the essentialist understanding of literature and the arts and their relevance to society and history was set in motion by Hegel. Hegel shattered the belief in the supposedly unchanging universality and centrality of literature and the arts within the time-bound social reservoir of expressive and communicative forms. In his theory of aesthetics he spoke of his own time as the end of the age of art,<sup>10</sup> as the end, that is, of the ability of art and literature to represent the essence of an age that is now dominated by reflection. In historicizing the essentialist function of literature, Hegel placed its historical aspect in the foreground. The essentialist, totalizing, and integrating function of literature and the arts became a thing of the past, namely a special characteristic of Greek antiquity and “classical” periods of high literary achievement.

The notion that literature past and present could be seen and judged from different perspectives allowed for the combination of ideas of essence and history as change. Such a combination of rival notions, however, made the selection and evaluation of literary facts increasingly problematic, the more so as the social context lost its common basis. The generally accepted common “high” culture (in contrast to civilization) dispersed, as the unity of a religious and metaphysical view of life and history broke up into what Max Weber called the “process of rationalization” (34). This led to an increasing independence of the various sectors of society, of science, morality and law, art and culture, together with a differentiation of their respective value systems. The cultural system detached itself from the other spheres of social life — a fact that made the values of art and society finally irreconcilable. Art uncoupled itself from the social and economic systems, as far as that is possible, since it cannot possibly escape from being a mirror of the social irreconcilabilities. From Hegel on, aesthetics have mostly been the aesthetics of negation; positive thinking often came to appear as anti-aesthetic. Against “the power of positive thinking” Adorno sets “the seriousness of unswerving negation” which “lies in its refusal to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are” (1990, 186). What moves dialectical thinking is pain and suffering, not joy and happiness: “Conscious unhappiness is not a delusion of the mind’s vanity but

something inherent in the mind, the one authentic dignity it has received in its separation from the body” (1990, 203). Though for the modernist author like Adorno the disjunction between (social) reality and art is an antagonism that allots literature a purely negative function, a “negative commitment”, art does not indict the moral deficits in the social world directly, since direct negation is “profoundly inartistic”, i.e., anti-aesthetic. Explicit criticism is always didactic and outer-directed; it is touched by and must argue in terms of the criticized, and it thus violates the autonomy of art. The latter demands aesthetic distance via form, not only in relation to society but also in relation to the subject, especially emotion, as T.S. Eliot notes when he claims that “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’” (1934a, 145). Stephen Spender in his book *The Struggle of the Modern*, the first and highly influential systematic theory of modernism in literature, in fact distinguishes the “‘moderns’ or ‘recognizers,’” who follow “A Vision of the Whole” (a chapter heading), from the “‘contemporaries’ and the ‘non-recognizers,’” with their “Voltairean I”, characterized by rationalism, “progressive politics”, the wish to influence and change the world, while the “modern I through receptiveness, suffering, passivity transforms the world to which it is exposed”(x, 72). That the negative attitude towards direct criticism of, and involvement with, society is still wide-spread in the Sixties and Seventies exemplifies Derrida’s warning that “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest”(1978, 280). The deconstructionist theory, especially that of Derrida, propounds the preference of rhetoric over logic, a free-ranging creation of meaning, liberated from the encumbrance of confining presuppositions, academic conventions and the postulate to solve problems and be socially relevant, and instead remains in the process of perpetual transcendence, of “Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (Derrida 1978, 292).

In respect to the cathartic hermetism of modern art, a crucial turning-point away from the self-enclosure of aesthetics was reached

when meanings and pleasures split. Meanings in modern aesthetics adhere to permanence in change, purity amidst impurity, freedom amidst a lack of freedom. The modernists relegate pleasure to the enjoyment of the clichés, lies and sentimentalities of official culture and the facticities of social practice, to non-serious literature and art, to kitsch, “as if”, as Roland Barthes puts it, “the notion of pleasure no longer pleases anyone” (1975, 46-47). In modernist aesthetic culture, in contrast to its opposite, “civilization”,<sup>11</sup> the expectation that literature will generate comforting pleasure is, again according to Barthes, “continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favor of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc”. (1975, 57). Pleasure is sublimated into aesthetic satisfaction and seen to originate, in I.A. Richards’s words, from “intricately wrought composure” and an “equilibrium of opposed impulses” (197). It results from the formation of aesthetic awareness, which now takes on ethical value. The refusal of the modernist to mix meaning with pleasure leads to a dead end. Nevertheless, the elitist concept of literary meaning and the opposition of literature and kitsch remained, at least until the Sixties, the standard in literary theory and criticism. Adorno and Horkheimer denounce the mass culture of the “culture industry” with its “bloated pleasure apparatus” performing an “automatic succession of standardized operations”. This apparatus may remove unpleasant tensions and give immediate satisfaction, yet it “hardens into boredom” because it does “not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association” (137). The task of high literature and art, according to Lionel Trilling, is to attain “the negative transcendence of the human, a condition which is to be achieved by freeing the self from its thrall to pleasure” (65).

It has become obvious that these clear-cut boundaries between high literature and popular literature or kitsch, between texts that are structurally oriented and supposedly provide cognition, and reader-oriented texts that give pleasure and allow release from the hard facts of life no longer hold, and this even less so in America than in Europe. The European tradition of essentializing culture and art is of course important for America as well, but there are also differences. In the US, the lack or “softness” of an established canon of high literature and art has always made possible flexible interrelations between popular and sophisticated modes of discourse.

The market and its modish change of interest have played a much larger role in the definition of culture and in deciding what culture offers than in Europe. Pleasure in America's cultural scenario was not rigidly rejected the way it was in the elitist cultural concept that Europe held, with its focus on the "essential". As a matter of fact, America has made manifest the claim that culture can be hedonistic and, as such, provide entertainment and spectacle. Yet it also demonstrates that in a pleasure-oriented culture there are still written — more than ever — highly complex literary texts which seem to find their audience, in spite of Barth's "worrying about the death of the reader" (1995, 122). In this double tendency, there seems to be hidden a more general, transnational rule, according to which the different cultural levels interact. The development of literature and the arts in the twentieth century (towards meta-fiction and abstraction) shows that whenever the semantically structured aesthetic text becomes hermetically closed in its "purity", when, supported by a highbrow culture, it turns elitist as a privileged mode of representation and interpretation, and does not heed the requirements of the cultural environment at large, such as social information and analysis, pleasure and entertainment, the moment comes, when the environment, strengthened by a de-hierarchization of culture, "reacts" by relativizing or disregarding the complex experimental literary text. Conversely, if the borderlines between literary discourse and the cultural become too fluid, and the possibility marking deficits of meaning and thus of opposing the environmental givens is too radically reduced, then there is a re-constitution of the primacy of the artistic artifact, of the aesthetic system as the other, "since meaning always arises in closed contexts" (Luhmann 1987, 314).

Postmodern literature and art are the result of such a reconstitution of the aesthetic system. The need to retain the both distancing and engaging art perspective and its potential of otherness, of transgressing the boundaries of the familiarizing culture at large, and to keep open the space for the ineffable explains the continuing creation of a highly complex and defamiliarizing literature, which, in Barth's terms, gives "all power to the individual [...] and direct access to the invisible universe of sensibility", conveys "the *experiencing* of human experience" (1995, 365, 364). This effect comes to pass in spite of the dehierarchization of the cultural field,

the multiplication of the forms of communication and information, and the advance of the electronic visual media, the decrease in readership of the art novel, and of the cultural status or rather social effect of complex art. The loss of the shamanic role, however, may have a liberating influence on the artist, who both seriously and with irony may say, in Barth's words from *On With the Story*: "An end to endings! Let us rebegin!"(14).

To rebegin of course means to be conscious of an ending. The regeneration of art thus always takes place by contending with the past, with the achievements and ideologies and limitations of one's predecessors. It was the exposure of the contradictions in modern art — its utopian and totalitarian streak, the discrepancies in the concept of totalizing form and the cracks in the vision of the whole, indeed the failures in the attempt of encapsulating the unbounded and fragmented and chaotic within the discipline of form — that led to a new beginning within the literary series started by modern (romantic) art. The discovery of the incongruities in modern aesthetics relativized the most important value standard of (modern) art, namely the equivalence of content and form or, more specifically, the fusion of opposites in the *irony of form*, irony being responsible for ambiguity and contrast, and the *wholeness of form*, designed for conciliation and unity. It is a combinatory standard which demands two contrary, in fact mutually exclusive, things. In spite of this inconsistency high modernism makes their integration the criterion for the value of the individual text: (1) it fosters the inclusion within the meaningful form of as many of the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities of life, history, morals, truth, in short, of the cultural discourses and counter-discourses, as possible (the more complex the better), expressed in what already Friedrich Schlegel, the German romantic critic, called the "irony of form", a phrase that was adopted by the New Critics, especially Cleanth Brooks, and (2) it strives for the containment of ambiguity and disorder, chaos and force in the structural wholeness of form, representing "the vision of the whole" (Spender). Referring to Eliot's *Wasteland*, Cleanth Brooks expresses the standard modernist view on the relation between chaos and order. Their aesthetic interrelation allows a maximum of "conflicting elements", of the "discordant", the "amorphous and the heterogeneous and contradictory", yet only for the purpose of uniting them under the auspices of aesthetic form.

Eliot's "application of [...] complexity" thus also serves only to "give the effect of chaotic experience ordered into a new whole" (Brooks 1937; 39, 40, 43, 167). A modernist like Virginia Woolf accepts chaos merely as something that has to be transferred into aesthetic synthesis: "the irregular fire must be there; and perhaps to lose it one must begin by being chaotic, but not appear in public like that" (1973,74). The contradictions are obvious; thus the stage is set for an explosion of form, carried out by the avantgarde already in the modern era, by Dadaists and Surrealists, and then by the poststructuralists in postmodern times, whose deconstructive turn influenced and accompanied the development of postmodern art, without being coaxial with it. The views of the deconstructionists mark the crisis of both traditional theory and art.

With the poststructuralists aesthetics and aesthetic theory extend beyond the boundaries that define the aesthetic system and beyond the theory that proclaims the autonomy of art. As mentioned, the aesthetic becomes a force, a kind of vitality put into all rigid theories, thus exposing their limitations and energizing their activities. The expansion of radical, critical aesthetics beyond the aesthetic system makes it a deconstructive aesthetic *force* (acting against theoretical as well as aesthetic closure on the purely aesthetic, not a cultural basis); it thus complements, as it were, and "revokes" the extension and "emptying" of formalist aesthetics into the decorative, cultural aesthetic of the environment and vice versa. The aesthetic force that the poststructuralists speak of is arbitrary, fragmented, irrational, disruptive, and without implication and need of the possibility of reconciliation or redemption (for which, Derrida says, Adorno was still striving). Believing in the fruitlessness of a reform of philosophy, history, and political theory from within and following Nietzsche's claim that art is the "countermovement" to the "decadence forms" of humanity (qtd. in Carroll 1987, 24), Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, though in quite different ways, use the radical exteriority of art to philosophy, history, and politics in order "to deconstruct everything that presents itself as an order, to show that 'order' conceals something else, something that is repressed in this order" (Lyotard 1984a, 29), and to free the space for the "pleasure of infinite creation" (Culler 1976, 248). The aesthetic force brings about "the disarrangement of the arrangement that produces signification". It displaces all repressive concepts of writing, overcomes the narrow

ideas of identity, reveals the repressed or hidden “other”, and “disrupts communication” (cf. 1971, 68-69). Aesthetics, always a disruptive force, is aligned with the figural, metaphorical, the heterogeneous, unbounded, and unfulfilled as well as the transgressive, libidinal force of “desire”; it is transformed into radical energetics, into excess, a struggle of dispersive movements and counter-movements; in the sublime it presents the “unpresentable”, and harbors the “incommunicable” (Lyotard). Aesthetics generates a spontaneous doubling of language, a proliferation of the fantastic, and a liberation of the unstable from the stable (in representation), the incomplete from the complete, the discontinuous from the continuous (in history and discourse), the “illogical” or even “madness” from logic and (social) order, the other from the rule of the same. Literature and art are subversive, displace the subject and its form, and reflect the movement and struggle in the field of forces, the power-knowledge network; they mark the absence of order and reach the limit at the abyss, the absolute void of being underlying all systems of order.

By radicalizing the critical-aesthetic function of literature or rather literariness, the latter becomes disruptive to the extreme, dismantles epistemology, ontology, religion and established order, also aesthetic order, and searches for alternative possibilities, for whatever fits into “libidinal”, “critical”, “experimental”, and “self-reflexive” aesthetics or aesthetics of “crisis”, “displacement”, “absence”, “violence”, or “madness”. Aesthetics or literariness, existing as much outside the aesthetic system as inside, and turning into the energetics of force, a disruptive power, dissolves form and structure also of the literary text, and transforms them into temporal processes, into “play and difference”. “Form”, according to Derrida, “fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create” (1978, 4- 5). “Différance” with its dual meaning of “difference” and “deferral” (1988a) is “neither a word nor a concept”, but is in fact “strategic” and “irreducibly multivalent” (1973, 130, 131, 137). It renders the text unstable and indeterminate, deferring its meaning endlessly. For Derrida, literature in its higher, self-reflexive form is a privileged but disguised entryway into writing: it provides a limit case, a critical perspective, which, since there are only hybrid, not self-contained forms of writing, exists as much inside as outside, as much within literature

and theory as between them. It can, however, only serve the task of pushing philosophy and other “rational” discourses beyond its traditional delineations when it is in crisis, i.e., contains irresolvable contradictions that lead to “undecidability” and even “unreadability” (Derrida). Yet when the communicative limits are reached, “this unreadability does not arrest reading”, but rather “starts reading and writing and translation moving again” (1979a, 116) with alternative strategies, which, pushing towards and displacing the limits of literature and theory, never come to an end. This foregrounding of force instead of form calls for a mobile, a “nomadic” (Deleuze, Foucault) way of thinking, writing, and existing. Foucault’s advice runs as follows: “to prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic” (1984, xiii).

The one-sidedness, as well as the inherent contradictions and restrictions, limit this deconstructionist concept of critical/explosive literariness; they restrain, if not its value, then its scope or, rather, applicability. But they exhibit in the ideology of extremity the counter-concept to the modern wholeness of form: the demand for an energetic fragmentation of form — though, interestingly enough, art’s function is the same as in modernism: namely, to defamiliarize and subvert. This radically open view of literariness also dramatizes the tensions in aesthetics, which are evident at least since Nietzsche if not before in romanticism: the inherent conflict between *criticism* (of the reified, clichéd norms of society and the dualisms of thought and ethics), and the *acceptance* of life in all its forms and the tolerance of multiplicity in general. This is the reason that the theorists who write about the poststructuralists cannot agree if the latter are primarily “aestheticians” or critics of society and culture. As to literature, this deconstructionist aestheticism, if one wants to call it that, is confined to the experimental and self-reflexive literature of crisis, displacement, absence, violence, or madness. It defines literature not by its structure but by its disruptive function. And it propagates the excess of contradictoriness and most willingly embraces “unreadability”, paying no attention whatsoever to the communication pole of literature, hoping against all hope to force readers into new, unclichéd ways of thinking and feeling.



There are obviously parallels and differences between poststructuralism and postmodernism in terms of literature. To speak of parallels first: One can make out at least four ideas that are common to both poststructuralism and postmodern fiction: (1) order represses disorder, therefore order has to include chaos; (2) all positions are multivalent; the attempt at control of difference faces undecidability as a theme; (3) the forms of stasis need to be energized into dynamis; meaning is disseminated in the flow of time; (4) literature represents the incomplete, the illogical, the unrepresentable and incommunicable and requires new strategies of defamiliarization, up to the shock effect of extremity and excess, of unreadability. The differences evolve from the poststructuralist critique of structure. As Niall Lucy notes: “for poststructuralism (1) the nature of literature in general is such that there can never be any hard and fast distinction between orders of literature-in-particular that might be understood in terms of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ systems (realism and meta-fiction, say), and (2) the nature of creating-in-general is such that there never can never be any hard and fast distinction between so-called literary and non-literary orders of writing-in-particular” (Nial Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory* 121). As a result of the focus of their critique on structuredness and centeredness, the poststructuralists do not refer to the build-up of narrative-in-particular. Yet the postmodern fiction writers write narratives-in-particular, even if Gass notes, “[m]y stories are malevolently anti-narrative”, because, again in Gass’s words, “the aesthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a world” (1970, 18), and the writer’s “energy [is] employed in the activity of making”, the making of “something supremely worthwhile, [...] something inherently valuable in itself”. Thus the questions have to be faced of how to combine force and form, how to “control each scene as it develops” (Gass 1996, 35, 45), how to reconstruct the text after deconstruction, how to communicate what is to be expressed — though the term expression is not much liked by the postmodern writers. The extreme poststructuralist positions have almost nothing to say about how to make fiction: they can only be instructive guidelines and stimuli for limit cases, such as we have discussed before in connection with the art series and its development to extremes and excess. What is needed is a new conceptual direction;

what is achieved is a conceptional system of considerable complexity that combines narrative and “anti-narrative” strategies.

## 2.6. Aesthetics and Ethics: The Aesthetic Attitude and the Value of Experience

The aesthetic of postmodern fiction obviously needs a wider understanding of the aesthetic mode and artistic discourse than poststructuralism can provide; it aims for a concept that is antiauthoritarian, inclusive specifically of experiments with popular culture, with the ironic and comic modes, one that is more tolerant of traditions and of the manifoldness of possibilities, and that rejects none of them, though it transforms all of them. As mentioned, aesthetics has two poles, criticism of fixities and acceptance of plurality. With an exuberant sense of new possibilities, the postmodern writers stress the latter pole, which stands for inclusion, for tolerance also of the non-extreme, not-crisis-like, even rational, of the context of multiplicity. It is one of the paradoxes of postmodern art that its texts and artifacts often experiment with the limit, are in fact limit cases, while the ideologies they are based on propagate inclusiveness, multiplicity and tolerance. The attitude that sustains and conveys this wide-ranging orientation towards plurality we call the *aesthetic attitude*. It is the third area or aspect of the postmodern aesthetic (the first and the second being the aesthetic of the autonomous artistic discourse and the cultural aesthetic of the environment). If for heuristic purposes we here separate deconstruction from reconstruction — though in practice they are of course inseparable — the aesthetic attitude is responsible primarily for *reconstruction*. The aesthetic attitude is actually nothing new; it has its origin in Kant’s notion of the disinterestedness of the (reflective) aesthetic judgment, which functions in the absence of fixed values and predetermined rules, and resists theoretical closure from within, as well as in Nietzsche’s rejection of the Western two-dimensional scheme of thought, his discrediting of the hubris of human reason and its dualisms, and his call for a non-essentializing conception of the world that accepts it aesthetically in all its variety and energy.<sup>12</sup> Flexibility in viewpoint is the reason that, since Nietzsche, aesthetics has come to the fore.

The aesthetic attitude gains special importance for postmodernism, in all its sectors of understanding, culture, theory and the arts, because it broadens the outlook, energizes comprehension, and joins perspectives. For Susan Sontag, for instance, aesthetics and ethics combine: “art is moral, insofar, as it is, precisely, the enlivening of our sensibility and consciousness [...] Art performs this moral task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, attentiveness, the awakening of feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life” (25). The aesthetic attitude finds its privileged place in art, and in the aesthetic experience that art furnishes. Yet it reaches beyond the experience of art. What Barth proposes for the replenishment of art, the recycling and reevaluation of its traditional forms, already presupposes a further distancing and balancing of the mind beyond aesthetic experience in the narrative sense, a reflexive-stance aesthetic that compares, connects, and redirects and thus is more general and “abstract” than the immediate aesthetic experience of the literary text from which it emerges. Relying both on aesthetic experience and aesthetic reflection, the reflexive aesthetic creates an aesthetic attitude. The aesthetic attitude, however, is not confined to the realm of art. It spreads and takes on many forms and functions, also outside the arts. It has meanwhile broadened its scope to such an extent that one speaks of an aesthetic of history, of sociology or even physics.<sup>13</sup>

In its various appearances, the aesthetic attitude is averse to generalizations; it directs the attention to the particularity and the plurality of forms of life, includes the experience of relativity and manifoldness, contingency and the local/historical (instead of universal or eternal) determination of codes. It is not directed towards principles that guarantee a “rightness” of behavior but towards decisions that have to be made according to circumstances in concrete situations (see Caputo 1993), a concept that implies has the radical conclusion that there can be no “right” behavior according to general rules. Though the aesthetic attitude does not incline towards the absoluteness of determining principles, it has in its unwillingness to tolerate ideologies (also the ideologies of poststructuralism) nevertheless an ethical function, in spite of the fact that some of the critical theorists of postmodernism suggest the contrary. In

complicating and relativizing ethical issues by attending to the singularity and heterogeneity of situations, the aesthetic stance only expresses the current contradictory notions of truth and ethical evaluations. It marks the weakening of religious beliefs and the belief in a wise and unchanging nature as a substitute for God or in the tribunal of History, its justice and guarantee of progress. Ethics, which is now without an essentialist foundation as a meta-discourse, and indeed also the ethics of the literary text, gains through the aesthetic attitude a profile of tolerance and self-reflexivity. With a contemplative composure, tempered with responsibility but without abstract anxiety and false emotionality (a position whose pluralism lies before all morality but in fact includes practical reason), the aesthetic attitude is able to incorporate a mixture of sensuous approach and comprehending judgment, of distance and engagement, hedonistic pleasure and outgoing sympathy. Such a negotiating function of the aesthetic attitude, cultivating a space in between (as postmodern art does), can help to lessen (not dissolve) the tensions within ethics by restraining totalizing ideologies, by supporting a kind of local-area ethics (e.g., ecological or environmental ethics), and by discounting binary oppositions or mediating between polarizing principles like sameness and difference, familiarity and otherness, or power and resistance. In the aesthetic attitude, ethics and aesthetics enter a kind of partnership. The result of the combination is a conglomerate that is open to varying emphasis, of course also to debasement. It establishes an ethics of tolerance, which in America finds its social and political correlative in multiculturalism; it mediates among cultural levels.

The aesthetic attitude allows the postmodern writer to include the widest possible contradictions into a unity of multiplicity, such as continuity and discontinuity, disparity and coherence, simplicity and complexity, sequence and simultaneity, causality and arbitrariness, culture and nature, and also autonomy and intertextuality. Postmodern fiction's struggle and play with endless *possibilities* that relativize or swallow up actualities is an expression of the aesthetic attitude, now turned towards narrative world-building, towards reflections of characters and narrators, and meta-fictional considerations of the artistic process and its meaning. The shift of perspectives from anxiety and pain to irony and the comic mode is another significant demonstration of the workings of the

pluralistic aesthetic view. Barth's story "Night-Sea Journey", with its dramatized, albeit also comic anxieties and all-round reflections of a spermatozoon on its way through a woman's vagina to the egg cell and certain death; or his "Menelaiad", with Menelaus doubting, surmising, speculating what his wife Helena's feelings for him are; or Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, thematizing innocence and experience and their interlockings; or the endless reflections of Gass's protagonist, the professor of history, in *The Tunnel*, who is not able to finish his book on the Nazi concentration camps; or the multiple endings of Coover's story "The Baby Sitter"—all these and a host of other postmodern narratives are examples of how the aesthetic attitude is both exercised and for narrative purposes problematized and dramatized according to what Barth calls the narrative schema, consisting of a "Ground-situation [uncertainty] and a Dramatic Vehicle [multiplicity]" (*OwS* 36). As these fictions demonstrate, the inclusiveness of the aesthetic attitude induces it to include also its own opposite, the opposite of balance and conciliation. The aesthetic view is not only conciliatory but also marks the irreconcilable contrariness of positions, too, even the contrariness of aesthetics and ethics, yet not in terms of static concepts but in a continuous *process* of reflection, of adjustment and re-adjustment, in the *interplay* of deconstruction and reconstruction. The ultimate form of this process is the paradox.

But this aestheticizing of postmodern fiction, not only of its form but also of its content, is not only the source of its regeneration but also the major target of all the attacks against its so-called self-reflexivity and narcissism. This antagonism, however, has to be seen in a wider context, the aesthetics-vs.-ethics debate in general, which is used to accuse the aesthetic attitude of a distancing posture. The aesthetic stance, for instance, is made responsible for the "aestheticizing" of the Enlightenment and its unfinished project of modernity (Habermas), which, it is said, appears in hindsight as "sublime" or "heroic" but no longer as simply "true" or "relevant" or urgent in terms of social change. In another context, the aesthetic of art and the concept of aesthetics in general are allegedly fed (debased, as its critics maintain) by the cultural aesthetic of the environment and its hedonism, the indiscriminating consumption of goods, information, fashions, and lifestyle. Paul DeMan, the coiner of the term "aesthetic ideology", maintains that "the aesthetic [in

contrast to the “linguistics of literariness”) is, by definition, a seductive notion that appeals to the pleasure principle” (DeMan 1986, 64). We remember here the derogatory remarks of the theorists of modernism about pleasure. It is furthermore assumed that the aestheticization of the self, on whatever level, separates the faculties of action and reflection, and thus splits or deactivates the person. The conservative sociologist Daniel Bell in his *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* speaks of the destructive effect on society of an exhausted and self-reflexive “adversary [aestheticized high] culture”, which rebels against the normality of everyday life, against the morally and socially good and the practically useful in the name of the unlimited demand for self-fulfillment and authentic self-realization of the individual. Critics of our media landscape complain that politics is aestheticized, and that the aesthetics of show business and the spectacle fill the public realm. In hindsight historians connect fascism with an aestheticization of politics that makes the leader an artist and the masses the passive object of his “creative” impulse. The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, for his part, speaks of “the aesthetic”, as the “language of political hegemony of an imaginary consolation for the bourgeoisie bereft of a home”, though he acknowledges its potential for a “utopian critique of the bourgeois social order” (1988, 337). Gerald Graff condemns postmodern fictional texts because they “become either a self-contained [i.e., purely aesthetic] reality unto itself or a disintegrated, dispersed [i.e., aesthetic or, rather, anti-aesthetic] process”, while in our difficult times, when “the importance and truth of literature” is deflated by “the conspiracy of external forces”, it should be the purpose of literature “to shore up the sense of reality” (9), which would mean of course that literature (alone?) knows and can teach the world what reality and truth are. As Martin Jay notes: “In this cluster of uses, the aesthetic is variously identified with irrationality, illusion, fantasy, myth, sensual seduction, the imposition of will, and inhumane indifference to ethical, religious, or cognitive considerations” (74).

The positive comments on the aesthetic attitude generally connect the aesthetic view with the ethical one. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) sees only in the radicalized aesthetic form (of a Samuel Beckett or Paul Celan) an authentic and effective possibility of resistance against the all-present grip of mass culture and its mentor, the logic of capitalism. Susan Sontag relies on an

“uncompromising aesthetic experience of the world”. She holds that “the divorce between the aesthetic and the ethical is meaningless”, and announces that “the world is ultimately an aesthetic phenomenon” (*Against Interpretation*, 1961, 28). Not surprisingly, the writing of history is seen in terms of aesthetics. Hayden White speaks of the necessity for historiography to work with aesthetic designs that create meaning through contrast. (1974). The theologian Wolfgang Huber thinks it necessary “to regain an aesthetic relationship to the environment” (29). Frederic Jameson speaks of the necessity to undertake what he calls “an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*” (1992, 89). Mike Featherstone notes that “the shift to aesthetic criteria and local knowledge may just as possibly lead to mutually expected self-restraint and respect for the other” (126). Joseph Margolis has at last claimed, from the viewpoint of the early Eighties, that “aesthetics is the most strategically placed philosophic discipline of our time” (1980, 174). Confirming the importance of the aesthetic perspective, A. Megill considers Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida as “aestheticists”, who expand “the aesthetic to embrace the whole of reality” (2).<sup>14</sup> One might add in this context that Nietzsche and Heidegger, as well as later thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard (see Carroll 1987), replace “strong” meta-concepts of man-imposed order like origin, continuity, causality and teleology with more “tolerant” and “weaker” (one might add, aesthetic) ones (see Vattimo 1988) like simultaneity, discontinuity, complementarity, and complexity. As mentioned, the postmodern writers have adopted the aesthetic attitude both as principle of composition and as principle of creating meaning.

The relativization of the modernist art standard, the expansion of aesthetics beyond the discourse of art into the cultural aesthetics of the environment, and a general leveling of the criteria of evaluation have led to grave uncertainties as to what art is and what art’s function is. The attempt to hold on to a humanistic art concept explains the harsh reactions of the more traditional critics against postmodern fiction and postmodern art in general, against their alleged lack of a consensual interpretation of the world, their rejection of a (rational) concept of order as a criterion of evaluating chaos. For the first time (besides certain philosophical reservations towards the function of art since Hegel and the Dada movement), not only a specific kind of (avantgarde) art was criticized but the

presuppositions and claims of art in general. This occurred not from an outsider position but in an intellectual climate and a market-oriented culture that were defined by the assumption that there was no privileged way of communication and analysis, and that art was one channel of communication among others and had to be culturally defined. Thus the attack on postmodern art came from two sides, from the humanistic modernist school and from the school of cultural persuasion that propagated, explicitly or implicitly, the need of social (or market) relevance.

Let us turn to the deconstruction of the art standard first. With the relativization or abandonment of the modern combinatory standards of irony of form (tensions, ambiguities, conflicts) and wholeness of form (continuity, coherence, unity), art loses its own, rather narrowly defined, *intrinsic aesthetic* standard for evaluating artistic achievement and aesthetic meaning: the *significant form*, the complex and totalizing art structure as the “objective correlative” (T.S. Eliot) of both ambivalent and integrating meaning. It becomes evident in comparison that there is no significant, unique postmodernist theory of literature (and art in general) that could be set against the attacks against fiction’s supposed “narcissism”. In fact, it turns out that postmodern fiction in its self-understanding and ultimate goals depends, in one way or another, on the modernist ideology of defamiliarization and alienation. The change is one of attitude. This interdependence explains and justifies, for instance, Gass’s above-mentioned conclusion that the so-called postmodern writers, including himself, were in fact late modernists, though it does not justify the blurring of differences. After the early controversies and the rigorous dominions of postmodern art in contrast to modern art had abated in the later discussions, the continuities between modernist and postmodernist fiction were indeed recognized; mostly unrecognized, however, remained the fact that postmodern fiction in fact fully satisfies the criteria of the modernist art concept, the aforementioned combinatory standard of irony of form and wholeness of form, though the new inclusive “wholeness” of form was one of multiplicity, of perspectivism. The irony of form manifests itself now in the blurring of categories, such as reality and fiction, Being and Becoming, surface and depth, uniqueness and multiplicity, the wholeness of form in the combination of order and chaos as new unity. The modernist concept



of combining ambiguity, tension and organic wholeness in form is thus not simply dismissed, as some of the radical statements, especially by Federman and Sukenick, might suggest, but the tensions are radicalized and the notion of organic wholeness expanded for the purpose of including both order and chaos — now however no longer under the guidance of the logic of order as ultimate principle of life and art but with disorder on an equal footing with order. The consequence is that order can turn spontaneously into chaos (and endless multiplicity) and chaos into order, the fictional form's now being prepared so as to make space for both and for their metamorphoses (see the discussion of force and form as constituents of the narrated situation below).

In addition to the problems originating from within the art family and art theory, postmodern art faced the other problem, namely how to retain or regain a significant place in the culture at large. When art theory can no longer define art within the three schemes that it has prepared for the evaluation of art — mimesis or representation, imaginative expression of emotion and cognition, and (unity of) organic form — art becomes open in its definition as art to *non-aesthetic* criteria. Theodor Adorno begins his *Aesthetic Theory* with the sentence: “It is now taken for granted that nothing which concerns art can be taken for granted any more: neither art itself, nor art in its relationship to the whole, nor even the right of art to exist” (1984, 5). The theory of art has taken to heart this skepticism as to the definition and status of art. In order to be on safer ground, it has widened the perspective and made the study of art part of wide-ranging *cultural studies*. They include non-aesthetic aspects in the definition and evaluation of art.

One way to define art then, especially visual art, but analogically verbal art as well, is the Institutional Theory, that is, “a work of art means whatever has been put forward by an institution or a relevant person” as a putative artwork (see Dickie 1964; Arthur Danto 1964, 580; and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*); but this notion does not break up the circle of definition since the art-defining Institution again needs a reason for its performative act — and this reason can only lie in the specific quality of aesthetic experience, which, however, nobody can define in a way that includes by common consensus in the visual arts the works of both Rembrandt and Duchamp's “Fountain”. George Dickie tries to

dissolve this circle by denying that the reception of art needs a “special kind of aesthetic consciousness, attitude or perception” (1964, *ibid.*).<sup>15</sup> For Dickie, appreciating an artwork is “something like” saying that “in experiencing the qualities of a thing one finds them worthy or valuable” (1974, 40-41). He is not alone in his deviation from the traditional definitions of art. Arthur Danto, attempting to find criteria on which the artworld can base its judgment, recurs to the modern non-aesthetic standard of innovation or newness — “since any definition of art must comprise the Brillo Boxes, it is plain that no such definition can be based upon an examination of artworks” (1981, vi, 93).

In order to spare new art the struggles in the battlefield of aesthetics, Timothy Binkley axiomatically separates aesthetics and art, claiming that being aesthetic “is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being art” (32). Similarly, Bohdan Dziemidok asserts that “contemporary artistic practice proves that it is possible to create [...] works of art which completely (or almost completely) lack aesthetic value of any kind” (15). When the structurally defined aesthetic of art exhausts itself in the continuous search for newness or succumbs to the marketplace, the (formerly) anti-aesthetic paradoxically seizes the subversive function of the aesthetic and thus becomes part of the aesthetic or, viewed another way, explodes the aesthetic concept of form. This is not only the case with certain trends of Pop art and with the Trash art of the Seventies and Eighties but also with some of the excessively experimental novels of, for instance, Abish, Federman, and Sukenick, which we discussed above. All these considerations of art values finally lead to the question of how long, under the changing cultural conditions, is the allotted life-span of the artwork/novel and what the criteria are that might explain differences in the durability of texts and artworks. The answer becomes as much of a problem as the definition of art itself (see Corzo).

Postmodern fiction counters the deconstruction of the aesthetic value of the modern concepts of organic (“harmonizing”) form by foregrounding *experience*, which combines content and form more in terms of process and flow than in terms of structure. It links in the fluidity of force and form the representation of experience in the text and the experience of the text by the reader as something procedural and fluid. This narrative tendency explains the new

relevance of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, which firmly grounds art and the experience of art in the experience of life and tries to avoid rigid systems of definitions. Foregrounding experience de-emphasizes the ("spatial") structure of the text and privileges the temporal flow in the definition of art. "Experience" is actually an unsatisfying notion, yet it is an open term that is not narrowly circumscribable, not readily subjectable to a summary, a hierarchy, and ideology. It does not separate language and world; in fact it fuses the linguistic process and the dynamics of the imaginary world. And it includes the other facets of narrative, simultaneity, plurality and empty spaces in-between. In addition, experience is able to describe in one term the mental activity that is happening on all three levels of the communication-process text: the author, the artifact, and the reader. Federman remarks that what he is looking for and trying to offer in *The Voice in the Closet* is "the essential of the closet experience of my childhood. It is that essential, and not the story itself, which may mean something to my readers" (LeClair and McCaffery 142-43). The author learns by experience, not by ideas, where he or she is going, for "[t]he writer begins to understand only in the process of writing. The more you write, the more you rewrite [...], the better you stand a chance of understanding what you are doing and who you are" (143). In Sukenick's words, the novel has "the obligation [...] to rescue experience from any system" and to "seek to approximate the shape of experiencing"; "[i]f reality exists, it does not do so *a priori*, but only to be put together. Thus one might say reality is an activity, or process, of which literature is part"; it is "a nexus of various kinds of energy, image and experience"(1985, 11, 241, 207). For Gass "we do what we can to destroy experience — our own and others", while "[w]orks of art [...] construct, they comprise, our experience; they do not deny or destroy it; and they shame us, we fall so short of the quality of their Being" (1970, 282-83). Barth enunciates the necessity of articulating experience and the problem that the articulation of experience incurs. In *The End of the Road*, Jacob Horner notes:

To turn experience into speech —that is to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it —is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking (119).

Experience in postmodern fiction is opposed to understanding or, rather, rationalization and categorization, and it is in fact non-communicable. Literary experience is meant to counter the “denaturing of experience” caused by the denaturing of “language, context, time and the human” in the twentieth century, which leads to “incredulity [Barth says “skepticism”] toward narrative as a form of representation” (Hayles, qtd. in Barth 1995, 308) —to what Barthelme calls “the burnt-out boxcars of a dead aesthetic” (1985, 43) — and thus calls for new forms of narrative and narrative experience. While in most *modern* texts, experience is the beginning of a process that is supposed to lead to awareness, to knowledge of the self and the world, even to some kind of mental wholeness, and while the failure to attain such a goal produces suffering and pain, despair and alienation, because awareness, understanding, and knowledge are prerequisites of a sense of identity and authenticity, *postmodern* fiction starts out from the perception that experience and rationalization are not fully (or not at all) compatible, that there is a hiatus between perception and reflection, that the indissoluble mixture of perception, emotion, desire and reflection that makes up experience cannot be abstracted, transferred into a design, or taught as insight to others. This opposition between the immediacy of experience and the removed activity of reflection, between the fluidity of the former and the categorical approach of the latter, takes the place of the problematics of identity as a central issue of postmodern fiction. In a way, this antinomy between experience and reflection, experience and articulation determines and explains both the worldview and the form of the New fiction, i.e., the radicalization of incongruity, the transformation of actuality into possibility, and the multiplication of versions of the world, of the self and of the story. All these strategies are conceived as strategies of disorientation and re-making that are meant to render it more difficult for the reader to abstract from and thus falsify the text, the experience of the text, by imposing (humanistic) “meaning” on it and making up some kind of unfounded synthesis. All postmodern fictional strategies aim to force the recipient to remain on the level of “experience”, to narrative fluidity, immediacy, and energy, to accept gaps, breaks, and ruptures without logical “explanation”, to realize the energy of desire and Life, and not to refer to the rules and norms

of society and the categories of the mind. This entails employing the categories of the mind in an open way, with full knowledge of the unbridgeable gap between experience and reflection, and with respect for the uncompassable and ineffable, the unrepresentable, which can only be represented as presence in absence.

Experience is in fact so important for postmodern fiction that it becomes a thematic idea. It is “dramatized” in three ways: by setting it against reflection, by creating an opposition between innocence and experience, and by placing the idea of experience against the denial of (satisfying, orienting) experience. The subjects of Gass’s *Omensetter’s Luck* are the fall from innocence to experience and the destructive influence of reflection on the ability to experience the world directly. Barthelme says in a story called “The Balloon”: “The balloon resists definite *meaning*. However, it can be *experienced*” (Ziegler and Bigsby 161). Barth, like Gass, thematizes experience, especially in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. He makes the dialectic of innocence and experience the paradigm on which the whole book is composed — “the tragic view of innocence, the comic view of experience” (1995, 265) — with experience winning and innocence taking the place of a nostalgically revered ideal. *Giles Goat-Boy* thematizes the process of experiencing initiation, erring and maturing, arriving at the top and becoming Grand Tutor, and experiencing finally the failure of the attempt to rationalize and categorize experience — in spite of the fact that the regulating norms of society call for a categorization of experience and thus for the falsification of experience in the name of containment and control of the non-structured and chaotic. A number of stories in *Lost in the Funhouse*, for instance the title story, or “Night-Sea Journey”, or “Menelaiad”, or two stories from *Chimera*, “Perseid” and “Bellerophoniad”, build on this script of experience, experience having the advantage, that it is not pre-structured in a form (other than the quest), is spontaneous, does not infer a specific origin or goal, and is all-inclusive, having a kind of new *unity* on a spontaneous, pre-rationalized level. Experience is something that one has or that is denied, for whatever reason. *Paranoia* in Pynchon’s novels, and *obsession* in Elkin’s fiction, for instance, are the result (or the cause) of the withholding or the unattainability of useful, orienting, or “genuine” experience. “Drifting” is a term that Pynchon employs, for instance in *The Crying of Lot 49*, for the paradoxical state of

meeting the world without experiencing it “really”, as it “is”, which means that the most direct way of confronting the world and the self, “experience”, is dissolved into uncertainty. Barthelme’s texts often appear strange because the material and the language used are abstracted from and thus interrupt the familiar flow of experience, so that the fictional character as well as the reader appear to be estranged from all commonsense contact with the world and to be forced to reorient experience. The narrative strategies of postmodern fiction indeed serve this goal of reorienting experience.

They create fantastic incongruities and align experience with possibility, spontaneity and randomness, with a liberated sense of exploration that is “self-ironic but serious” (Barth *OwS* 91). Incongruity, plurality, and complexity form an adequate condition for experiencing the flow of the world, the self, the story, and truth in paradoxical terms, in a paradoxical relationship between dynamis and stasis, motion and rest, expressed by Zeno’s famous Seventh Paradox, as written by Barth:

If an arrow in flight can be said to traverse every point in its path from bow to target, Zeno teases, and if at any moment it can be said to be at and only at some one of those points, then it must be at rest for the moment it’s there (otherwise it’s not “there”); therefore it’s at rest at every moment of its flight, and its apparent motion is illusory. To the author’s way of thinking, Zeno’s Seventh Paradox oddly anticipates not only motion pictures [...] but also Werner Heisenberg’s celebrated Uncertainty Principle, which maintains in effect that the more we know about a particle’s position, the less we know about its momentum, and vice versa (*OwS* 84-85).

The paradox inherent in the workings of space/time, position/motion, rest/flight, or however one wants to call it, is the basic paradox of experience, of the stories of our lives, of the lives in the stories and the situations in fiction. At every moment everything is “frozen”, at rest, but “all freeze frames are in motion —spacewise, timewise” (*On With the Story* 89). The aesthetic matrix of postmodern fiction represents, is in fact made up by, this paradox of experience; the latter determines or rather includes both sequence and simultaneity, disrupting sequence by simultaneity and simultaneity by sequence.

Yet Zeno’s Seventh paradox is only one side of the story. There is another famous paradox that has a direct bearing on postmodern fiction, in Barth’s words: “Zeno’s famous paradox of

Achilles and the tortoise. Swift Achilles, Zeno teases, can never catch the tortoise, for in whatever short time required for him to close half the hundred yards between them, the sluggish animal will have moved perhaps a few inches and in the very short time required to halve that remaining distance, an inch or two more, et cetera —ad infinitum, inasmuch as finite distances, however small, can be halved forever”. Barth uses this paradox to illustrate the other antithesis of postmodern fiction: to have to end the story but to be unable to end it, “[b]ecause there are narrative possibilities still unforecasted. If our lives are stories, and if this story is three-fourths told, it is not yet four-fifths told, if four-fifths not yet five-sixths, et cetera, et cetera — and meanwhile, meanwhile it is *as if* all were still well”. Since our lives are stories but our stories not our lives, and time “omits nothing, ignores nothing, yet moves inexorably from hour to hour”, we have a paradoxical combination of non-ending and ending: “The story will never end. This story ends”. Barth builds the frame story of his collection *On With the Story* on the fact that though “Achilles can never reach the tortoise nor any tale its end, he does and theirs did, amen”. The male protagonist of the story in fact dies of cancer, without, however, causing any “end-stops in their love-story”. The quintessence of all this is: “Tales unended, unmiddled, unbegun, untold tales untold, unnumbered once-upons-a —” (26, 30, 256).

This is one way how situationalism becomes the ground figure of postmodern fiction: there is always another situation to be added to the foregoing situation, the story is serially composed, allowing no synthesis at any point, because time is always going on. And there is no point where one might say the story begins or “middles” or ends. To “the postmodern spirit”, it is said, “less and less does less seem more”. Barth’s idea of fiction is the (endlessly) reconstructive view of the story, the “exhaustive but inexhaustible, exhilarating novel” (1995, 87, 88). With the extension of the aesthetic process into infinity coincides an extension of (the concept of) *time*, which, as generations of philosophers —among them Augustinus, Kant, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty — have noted, is invariably bound to human perception. Barth, following the terms of the Zeno’s seventh paradox, connects the concepts of story and time to the perception of “[w]avehood” and “particlehood”, “momentum and position”, story and life, life and death. Yet of particlehood and wavehood the latter is central to Barth’s concept of life and story.

Story and dramatic action are like waves, feelings are waves (“Fact is, a wave (no other way to put it) of trepidation-cum-near- nausea has been building in him”). The question “Are we particles or waves?” is exuberantly answered: “Waves, definitely: mere everchanging configurations of memories and characteristics embodied in those other waves, our minds and bodies [...] indeed, all human relationships are waves [...] our [...] stories: waves, waves, waves, propagated from mind to mind and heart to heart through the medium of language via these particles called words” (*On with the Story*, 248, 249 124, 130, 143), words which guide “our experience of experiencing experience”(Barth 1995, 56), and through which, in Gass’s words, “we are seeing an act of seeing, not merely an object [...] are in effect witnessing a perception [...] John Hawkes is the American master of the sentence that sees” (1996, 40).

Deconstruction and reconstruction are partners in spirit and action. But one can emphasize the deconstructive or the reconstructive stance. The deconstructive view does not so much point to wavehood as to particlehood, to randomness and chaos, the end of logic and sequence. Sukenick writes: “situations come about through a cloudburst of fragmented events that fall as they fall and finally can be seen to have assumed some kind of pattern. The sequential organizations of the old novel are coming to seem like an extravagant, if comforting, artifice” (1975b, 38). With the latter statement all postmodern writers would agree, but the consequences drawn from it are different — different in the ways deconstruction and reconstruction are accentuated and combined. Meta-fiction is an attempt to have it both ways, to combine illusion with anti-illusion, to establish the story, and to interrupt and fragment the story. (“So far there’s been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening” [Barth, the title story in *LF* 74]). This kind of meta-fictional reflection, arguing from positions of traditional-narrative synthesis, underlines the lack of such synthesis in the text; it resigns the principle of integration to the narrated situation and the serially or accumulatively arranged sequence of situations, to the waves of perception, reflection, and storytelling, to the “narrative possibilities still unforeclosed” that are not to be synthesized. All the texts build the matrix of experience from the ideas of wavehood and particlehood. Fiction finds its field of rivalry and context in the



narrated situation and its guide in the aesthetic attitude. Postmodern fiction, as we will argue later, is more philosophically minded than any of its predecessors; its concordance with its time lies primarily in its epistemological condition of uncertainty and its dissolution of the concept of psychology and sociological unity and the current state of society and culture. This makes it necessary to give some more attention to what we have called situationalism in the various areas of knowledge and the socio-cultural condition of our world.

### 3. Situationalism

#### 3.1. Concepts of Culture, of Psychology, Sociology, and the Visual Arts

As we have seen, the concepts and practices of postmodern fiction share the stock of available ideas and their struggle for dominance, the range of knowledge, and the analysis of the social condition with philosophical theories and political and sociological thought. It is a truism that each period has specific notions, concepts, and strategies for coping with the world and the self. Foucault speaks of a common ground or matrix of knowledge and understanding at a specific time. One may call this a structure of knowledge, an “episteme”, as the early Foucault did, or prefer a more flexible term that emphasizes more the dynamics of the historical process. The upshot in either case, however, is that there is a shared reservoir of thought and world knowledge from which all draw. If one uses for simplicity’s sake the term episteme and follows Foucault in assuming that (1) the episteme of the 19th and early 20th century was the persistent attempt at exploring the invisible *deep structure* beneath the visible surface of things, at discovering the basic condition of human existence, for instance through the behavioral sciences of anthropology, psychology, sociology, but that (2) with the growing complexity of the modern world a shift has occurred away from the concept of the human personality as substance to its reduction to a fragile *subjectivity*, the episteme of aesthetic modernism (*Les mots* 1969, 13), then one can go a step further and see (3) the episteme of postmodernism in a loss of that subjectivity as measure of reality, and its substitution, as Steiner has suggested, with a *field of experience* that is more important than its experiencing subject and constitutes the alterity of the object.

The dominance of the field of experience over the subject of experience, the separation of this field into isolated situations, and the abandonment of a “good” sequence of these situations, of bonds of causality and logic, and of ideas of depth and essence, are the reasons for using the term “*situationalism*” as the episteme of our time. It is a term that accounts for discontinuity, incoherence, and immanence, but also for the fact that language is localized, defined

by “use”, by potentially innumerable, situationally grounded “language games” (Wittgenstein), in Lyotard’s words, by the “heterogeneity of language games” (1984c, xxv). Dismissing the autonomy of the subject and the representational stance, Lyotard notes that what he at first called “players” in language do not in fact make their own use of the language games but as mere agents are “on the contrary situated by phrases in the universes those phrases present”, and that before “any intention” (1984b, 17).

Such situationalism, in culture, language, and literature, on the level of combination turns into temporal seriality, i.e., follows the principles of addition, accumulation, and repetition (without a given order of cause and effect or of origin and aim). It mirrors the fact, in Jameson’s words, that “our entire contemporary social system has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions” (1983, 119). Hassan, claiming that the “play of indeterminacy and immanence is crucial to the episteme of postmodernism”, coins a new word for this condition, “indeterminance” (1980a, 91). It points, under a different aspect, to the state of affairs that we have called “situationalism”, which is characterized by both immanence (of the situation) and indeterminacy (of connections). The focus on the situation and a serialist composition reflects both the deconstructionist idea of fracture and “a concept of literature that is explosive” (Hassan 1980b, 56), explosive with energy.

The decrease of unity is the result of historical developments, first a separation of culture from the other spheres of life, and then the multiplication of cultures. As already mentioned, Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas, following Kant’s division of mental faculties, have diagnosed the drifting apart of the three “cultural value spheres”. The theoretical, the moral, and the aesthetic domains, by developing their own logic, have become increasingly independent from one another. Habermas argues that we are confronted with “three different forms of argumentation: namely, empirical-theoretical discourse, moral discourse, and aesthetic critique”, which form three different “rationality complexes” (1987, 207). As Lyotard notes, the “grand narratives of legitimization”, the “dialectic of the spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject” —in other words, the comprehensive universalist and utopian intellectual projects, the narratives of enlightenment and

emancipation, and the teleological expectations of Western cultures — are “delegitimized” in favor of heterogeneous and circumscribed “little narratives” (1984c, 48-50). This decentering of discourses can be evaluated quite differently — Habermas’s belief in reason and in the necessity of continuing the modern project of enlightenment differs notably from Lyotard’s and the other poststructuralists’ “dynamistic” cultural theories directed against the logocentric positions and systemic thinking of Western civilization — but its consequences cannot be denied. One consequence is that the division of social spheres has given the “rationality complex” of culture a greater weight in its own right, has in fact made it into a major constitutive power. Another consequence is that ethical thought is also situationalized. It can no longer depend on firm, determining principles that guarantee the “right” decision, but has to make decisions according to the specificity of situations, “since there are no general rules that separate right from wrong” (Caputo 1993, 44).

Postmodernism rejects concepts of wholeness and unity; the emerging “local” quality of culture is obviously shared by the epistemological and ethical structures of the time. “Situationalism” not only defines the culture at large but the behavioral sciences, too. *Psychology* attains “a distinctly Postmodern mode of thought”, for instance, in King’s interaction theory, in the abandonment of a self-centered identity and in the loss of “boundaries between self and other”. The English “[o]bject-relations theory decenters man so that we are never alone, always in relation. We are born in relation to an object” (Holland 300-305).<sup>16</sup> Norman Holland notes that the “concept of identity is itself High Modern, not Postmodern” and “that identity only comes into being as someone perceives it”, that “[t]he most personal, central thing I have, my identity, is not in me but in your interaction with me or in a divided me [...] We are among”. Accordingly, the individual is considered to be decentered, and “[p]ostmodern psychoanalysis is the study of human individuality as it exists *between* human skins. [...] Your identity is something I see as a function of my identity, and my identity [...] of somebody else’s” (303- 305). Then there is the notion that identity is a construct of narrative, that the past can only be reconstructed as situations, and that these situations are connected by a story, a constructed story, by which we, so to speak, “externalize ourselves as if talking to someone else and for the purpose of self-representation” (M. Currie

1998, 17), in fact, postmodern writers would argue, that a person is a multiple-story being and each story therefore fictional. Recent psychological studies deny the existence of qualities of character altogether. People are defined by the different situations they are in and the way they perceive them in quite pragmatic terms, for instance in terms of availability of time. Human beings behave differently towards a morally challenging situation depending on whether they have time to spare or not (Gilbert Hartman). Jacques Lacan challenges the Descartes's famous "cogito ergo sum" by writing: "I am where I think not" (1988, 97). The true subjectivity is thus not found in the conscious, connecting rationality but in the undeterminable and unnamable fluid structure of the unconscious, which for Lacan is similar to language. In language the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary; in fact "we are forced to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier", (1988, 87), and the signifier defines itself in this monistic view of language only in difference from other signifiers in an endless chain of deferrals and disseminations of meaning.

In a combination of sociological and psychological perspectives one can argue that postmodern habitats are "complex" systems; they are "unmotivated" and free from constraints of deterministic logic. The "existential modality" of the subjects or "agents" is defined by "indetermination, inconclusiveness, motility and rootlessness", and their identities are "neither given nor authoritatively confirmed" (Bauman 192-93). People move in a circle. Being left alone, they experience a "privatization of fears" that makes them look for "communal shelters", for "imagined communities" that are not based on specific goals and organizations but define themselves alone through their [situation-oriented] activities and therefore are subject to easy modification and change, depending on how the "taste cultures" develop: "Having no other (and above all no objectified, supra-individual) anchors except the affections of their 'members,' imagined communities exist solely through their manifestations: through occasional spectacular outbursts of togetherness, marches, festivals, riots" (Bauman xix-xx). One of the results of the proliferation of subcultures and imagined communities is that surface as field of experience, in culture as in fiction, becomes independent of the person who has culture. The eclectic and opportunistic, hedonistic and aestheticizing lifestyle of the decentered

postmodern subject provides only local knowledge and satisfaction. The situation forms the lifestyle and the activities to the extent that Malcolm Bradbury can say even of the writer: "The gift for creating the fictional illusion of reality is shifted from the writer [...] to the culture in which he practices" (1973, 19). Furthermore, the personal (moral) choice and not the social system was formerly the decisive factor.

With reference to *sociology* and other human sciences, Goffman speaks of the "neglected situation" (1964), the analysis of which, in sociology as well as in psychology, for a long time served other scholarly goals. Parson, for instance, studied functional action, i.e., a more synthesizing aspect of human life. The situation is understood as the intersection between person and role, with "subjective", i.e., personal, and "objective", system-oriented aspects, with processive and static traits. In sociology, as in psychology, there has been a slow process of abandoning abstract models of analysis (role and status) in favor of the description of the surface structures of the situation. The increased inclusion of the system-relativizing, process-oriented components into the analysis of the situation occurs via the intensified attention given to everydayness. For his part, Goffman concentrates on the surface rules of the situation, which he seeks to induce from empirical observations. This procedure leads him to a reevaluation of subject and object: "[T]his self [...] is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" (1959, 252-253). "My perspective is situational" (1974, 8), he states in the introduction to his *Frame Analysis*, thereby echoing W. I. Thomas, the founder of the situation concept. Together with the situation concept, the notion of performance (of the character) becomes important. Goffman sees the human being "as a *performer*, a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance" (1959, 252). Steven Seidman calls for a postmodern sociology of "local narratives" that are meant to "analyze a circumscribed social phenomenon in a densely contextual way" that would define the phenomenon "spatially and temporally" (70). By abandoning the status and system paradigms in favor of the surface of the situation itself and the performance

features of the subject's behavior within the situation, a decentralization is prepared which postmodern literature then translates into narrative representation.

We may now finally turn to the chaos theorist N. Katherine Hayles, who in her book *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* defines the root of postmodern culture as: "the realization that what has always been thought of as the essential, unvarying components of human experience are not natural facts of life but social constructions". The essential components of life, including language, context, time, and the human itself, have been "denatured" in four "waves" in the twentieth century, in fact, "[t]he postmodern [culture] anticipates and implies the posthuman". Let it suffice here to refer to the denaturing of context and time. According to Hayles, the human context has been denatured by information theory and technology: "And once this technology was in place, the disjunction between message and context which began as a theoretical premise became a cultural condition". Her examples include Borges's stories "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius". Along with the context, continuity and coherence are denatured, a circumstance which then shows in the denaturing of time (see also the chapter on time below). She notes that the "cutting loose of time from sequence, and consequently from human identity, constitutes the third wave of postmodernism. Time still exists in cultural postmodernism, but it no longer functions as a continuum along which human action can be plotted", which also leads to the denaturing of action, one might add (see the last chapter). Focusing on postmodern aesthetics, she cites Michel Serres's observation that the temporal aesthetics of the nineteenth century are replaced in the twentieth century by "a spatial aesthetic focusing on deformation, local turbulence, and continuous but nondifferentiable curves" (We will come back to what has been called spatial form later in the chapter on space).

It is especially interesting that John Barth in his Stuttgart lectures on "Postmodernism, Chaos Theory, and the Romantic Arabesque" makes Hayles one of his most important references, quoting from her book extensively (in fact I have taken the above quotes from his essay), because it throws light on the predispositions and preconceptions of the postmodern authors in general, not only on

Barth. In this essay he states what is the raw material, the thought basis of postmodern fiction, and what is not: “one does not write a truly contemporary novel [...] merely by writing about contemporary matters (as my distinguished countryman John Updike does so eloquently — and pre-modernistically — in his “Rabbit” novels), any more than one writes an arabesque merely by writing eloquently about Arabs. One writes a contemporary novel by writing it in a contemporary way”. The contemporary way is obviously to write on the basis of contemporary paradigms of knowledge, which are paradigms of uncertainty, of “a deeply ingrained ambivalence toward totalizing structures”, “both resist[ing] and contribut[ing] to globalizing structures” (Hayles). These models of thinking and narrating are models of deconstruction and reconstruction, based on an ambivalently situational structure in an undifferentiated flow of time. To quote Hayles once more: “For them [who live postmodernism] the denaturing of time means that they have no history. To live postmodernism is to live as schizophrenics are said to do, in a world of disconnected present moments that jostle one another but never form a continuous (much less logical) progression” (Barth 1995, 304-05). One need not share all the bleak outlooks mentioned, and may indeed recognize, as the postmodern authors do, the chances of the new and the potential that lies in the break-up of wholeness for creative deconstruction and reconstruction, but the direction is clear. After the deep structure of the situation has dissolved, only the surface (non)structure is left, and Sypher’s conclusion appears irrefutable: “If the significant is on the surface, then the need for depth explanation has gone and the contingent [...] is more authentic than the ultimate or absolute” (1968, 240) — except, one would have to add, that there is the void.

To extend our view in this chapter one last time we will include the visual arts into our argument. As is to be expected, situationalism also defines the postmodern graphic and plastic arts, as well as music. Painting and sculpture show the two crucial trends of art that we already met in fiction, the overloading with form and the cultivation of randomness as principles of composition. Both strategies demonstrate the dominance of deconstructionist theory, and are conducive to a situational and serialist construction without “good” continuity, coherence, and immanent logic. Postmodernism in painting and sculpture begins in America with some of the



constructionist and decorative forms of abstract expressionism; it continues with kinetic and Op art, Pop art, assemblages, environments, and land art, Minimalism, Conceptualism, documentary art, photo-realism, and others. Postmodernism gains its full force with Pop art, which mediates between cultural levels, reorients attitudes, and expands the concept of art. All the groups and tendencies mentioned are international, more so than is literature where immediacy of transfer is harder to achieve and language can be a barrier to easy accessibility. Speed of communication, change, and mobility are high in the visual arts because the market profits from the new and the media provide for the immediate transportation of all that is news. These artworks, irrespective of their style and ideology, are completely divorced from traditional discrete expressivity; they create isolated, often chance-dominated combinations which “are just there”, refuse any clear hierarchic or thematic organization, are actually in flight from interpretation, and deny any ideology of meaning. Unhampered by pre-ordained notions of structure and meaningfulness, they build up nothing but a pictorial situation in the interrelation with the recipient, one either of perceptual discontinuity or pure immanence of form, one at any rate of radical openness to interpretation. They enforce a peculiarly exclusive attention to the object and are overwhelming in impact because they cannot be reduced to order and yet insist by their sheer being there that to face them we do not need to make sense in any symbolic way. The new strategies of subversion are playful. They consider any surface or space as a potential “situation” that can be circumscribed, filled, shaped, and estranged. In order to avoid interpretation, they exclude the regimes of meaningful relations, narrative and theme, that would call forth a continuous hermeneutic activity, and include instead disorder with order, level tensions, and reduce order to surface compositions, to decoration or design. By creating on the picture plane or in the sculptural space, the (disruptive) simultaneity of the incongruous and the discontinuity of what is continuous or the self-contained design of abstract sculpture, the designs of art establish the “other” and with it the defamiliarizing dimension of strangeness and the fantastic.

This aesthetic program challenges anticipations, plays with positions, with the viewer’s expectations and feelings, and it radicalizes epistemological and ethical problems by the discordance

of the art language and its artifice. Yet the emerging gaps also furnish in-between spaces, which, though they are no longer part of a structural meaning, provide areas of association and contemplation. Everything becomes possible within this explicit aesthetic of discontinuity and incoherence, of anti-hierarchical, serial, random, “imagistic” composition, of the primacy of immediate sense-experience — of which Pop art in the late Fifties and early Sixties was obviously the prime generator. Pop artist Andy Warhol advocated a kind of artistic nihilism for stimulating creativity: “The reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do” (117). Another Pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein, summarizes his negative (anti-modern) attitude by defining the goal of Pop art as “anti-contemplative, anti-nuance, anti-getting-away-from-the-tyranny-of-the-rectangle, anti-movement-and-light, anti-mystery, anti-paint-quality, anti-Zen, and anti all these brilliant ideas of preceding movements which everyone understands so thoroughly” (26). What they argue against are integration, synthesis, organic wholeness. Robert Rauschenberg, who helps to prepare the ground for Pop art and whose paintings reflect “the sensory input of the city dweller and the industrial output of goods and waste” (Alloway 1971, 202), employs a paradoxical formulation, claiming that he aims at “an extremely complex random order that cannot be described as accidental” (“Random Order” 1963, 26-27). Frank Stella, searching for an “emotionally disengaged, formally rigorous and existentially anonymous” (Butler 57) version of abstract painting, notes: “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object” (Frank Stella, in Battock 157-58). And Carl André, a minimalist artist, aims at a “tough impassive anonymity” of his work, expressing a “contempt for the sanctity of the art object” (Waldman 201). A conceptual artist, Sol LeWitt, notes: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and that the execution is a perfunctory idea. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (166).

The result of the anti-modern sensibility that is expressed in these utterances is the reduction and transformation of technical means, the dissolution of the traditional, modern concept of closure

(and structure), and the exclusive reliance on the viewer's "pure", situation-bound perceptions (and associations) in the reception process. The issue initially was one of overcoming limits, with the new movement taking on an increasingly subversive character. The development passed from the aggressive provocation of Pop art to the merely factual (but intentionally subversive) constitution of the simultaneity of the "other". Jackson Pollock had already abandoned the concept of "center", without which an autonomous construction cannot exist, in the pure gestural expressions of his action paintings or "over-all" pictures. The dimension of the other appears with Rauschenberg on the canvas plane with the "found" or arranged object. Relics of nature are placed both as contexts and as "material" within the picture (as a stuffed goat's head, as a "door", or as a photograph with traces of paint in Rauschenberg's *Combine Paintings*). Furthermore, the deconstruction of form is reflected in the modifications of composition and format of the painting. The picture plane is de-centralized (Newman), its frame broken up (Stella in his "shaped canvasses"); holes and burns are put in the canvas (Fontana). The picture plane loses its autonomy and integrity, becomes an in-between, is, for example, explicitly related to the wall(s), the floor, or free space by neon tubes or wire, with the intention, in the words of Mario Merz, "to destroy the surface, to make something other of the surface, which nevertheless remains surface and light" (36). These examples demonstrate that all traditional principles of organization, which used to constitute a depth dimension, a psychological, sociological or, quite generally, a thematic coherence between form and content, are abandoned, actually quite openly and willfully rejected, in favor of the mere surface coherence of the situation, which now needs the viewer's active participation to be established as artwork or anti-artwork.

The transformation of art is most extreme in the assemblages and environments that often replace traditional sculpture. Montage and superimpositions of pictures in video-sculptures and video-environments "thematize" the problem of communication in the contrast, the in-between, of art and TV (cf. the Fluxes artist Nam June Paik). The "substrate" of painting, traditionally paper or canvas, is replaced by aluminum, copper, or magnesium, and turns into a three-dimensional sculpture on the wall (Stella), or gives way from the outset to the object. The paradigms of organic life and

consciousness are replaced by those of material and construction. The arrangements of opposites and their dynamic principle of contradiction call up in what is perceptually connected the disconnected and vice versa (art-life, plane-space, sculpture-object, nature-culture). Assemblages and environments serve only sensory perception, do not compose a whole, but, by the overriding presence of matter, by using the contrast between material and (missing) structure, are supposed to stimulate thought or do exactly the contrary, make one forget about all thought, depending on the specific ideology of art and the disposition of the viewer. The breakdown of barriers and the tension-filled contradictions create ruptures, gaps, a vacuum which do not depict the secrets of the psyche but that which is raw, massive, powerful, and energetic—in short the external world in all its inaccessibility—and in this way, by rejecting the long-practiced tradition of giving out clear formal signals of the artwork's specific significance, art serves as analogue to the inaccessibility of nature, as well as to the uncontrollable character of civilization. In the freedom of "making", art both celebrates the creativity of the imagination and cries out against the hubris of making, calls in fact for a new dialogue with the more comprehensive systems of nature, magic, ritual, and other forms of organization that would include randomness, chaos, and mystery.

And one further aspect of this kind of poststructuralist art is noteworthy. In constructionist art, the place of inherent meaning has shifted from the artwork to theory, which is the source or necessary concomitant of art, in fact the prerequisite and context of understanding its intention or non-intention. In the reception process there is a gap and an antithesis between immediate response and intellectual analysis; one has to react on two planes at once in order to create and experience the work of art (and the fictional text) and understand its underlying logic, which predetermines the production process. In its extreme, constructionist art emancipates itself even from the specific intention of the artist: it turns into contexts arising from the demarcations created for "free" associations by the viewer. This goes together with the minimalists' attempt to "cleanse" art of artistic expression and thus bar the thoughtless projection of the inner into the outer and keep the artistically formed situation pure. Concept art radicalizes the paradoxical in-betweenness of art by conceptualizing the art arrangement as anti-art, often using "art"

“conceptually” to pronounce the end of art through the relinquishment of its creative means. With regard to his “Ten Black Paintings”, Bob Law says: “The nature of my work can be viewed as the last complete unit of picture making in western culture easel painting, the extreme of abstract expressionism. So much so that one is no longer looking at paint but one is forced to be aware of the idea of a painting idea. At this point one has entered into conceptual art”.

Emphasizing mere randomness, the purely contingent, unplanned, and insignificant character of art, Daniel Spoerri refers to situationalism in the arts directly; he notes that “situations discovered by chance in order or disorder are fixed (trapped) just as they are upon their support of the moment (chair, table, box etc.), only the orientation with respect to the spectator is altered. The result is declared to be a work of art (attention —work of art)” (qtd. in Butler 102). As mentioned before, all these positions are closely connected by the dominance of theory over the artwork. This dominance relationship is different in fiction, a fact that bears witness to the specific, divergent qualities each discipline of art has. Though postmodern fiction is the most theory-conscious and philosophically minded type of fiction in the history of literature, it is — in spite of its natural alliance with aesthetic theory because of their common linguistic medium [in contrast to music and the visual arts ] — the most resistant to the dominance of theory. Narrative is a situational transformation of meaning, as we shall argue later, and thus has to reconstruct what it deconstructs in a sequence of situations, even if this occurs in a series of isolated combinations, with the elements juxtaposed in a serializing collage technique. This means that in fiction theory is always subordinated to narrative. What connects the various art forms in postmodernism is the importance of *experience*, to which theory is subordinated in all disciplines.

As in fiction, the artistic situation in the visual arts not only contains surface arrangements but can also achieve a depth dimension. The in-between area that has been won for art by an aesthetic of opposition marks not only a vacuum but offers new possibilities, too. As already mentioned, in the emptiness of the in-between, in the absence of absolute significance, a new “fullness” with new significations can gather, both in the visual arts and in literature. In the void, associations, allusions, connections, and impulses accumulate and exert their effect on the viewer, who,

willingly or not, is forced to become an active participant in the creation of the artwork. The full scope of this new fullness reaches into cosmic space, into the infinite, the mythical (Beuys), and the ineffable. In the visual arts, the reductions of minimal art prepared the way for the employment of elementary stereometric forms like the cube, the cylinder and the cone, as well as elementary, non-domesticable and resistant materials. Rusty steel planks bar and define familiar urban spaces (Serra), massive granite stones are piled up to form quasi-archaic walls (Rückriem). A dialogue is opened with the pre-formed, decorative, and harmless cultural environment, and also with domesticated nature, in which recalcitrant objects are placed as alien elements, as forms of the “other” (Judd, LeWitt, Long, Merz, Serra). Christo, the “packaging” artist, uses fabric to draw a fence through the California landscape, to span a valley, or to alienate a building. The immense dimensions of the earth and the universe are “measured” in land art sculptures. Walter de Maria with his steel rods draws the elementary force of lightning/light into his “lightning field” in New Mexico and thus creates in-between heaven and earth a cosmic light-space environment in which the contrast of nature and art evokes the “mythical other”. The only way art can any longer hope to communicate meaning in de Maria’s work lies in the openness of the situation, its endeavor to show the dimension of being, as Heidegger would have it, in its infinite absence, in the language of art, which (in an extension of Heidegger’s concept of language) may be called the “house of being” (see 1971). The spaces in-between, left by the process of de-traditionalization and de-spiritualization, are challenged for their own creative potential. In them the buried possibilities of experience and conception, the primal symbols, the elementary pictorial motifs, and the archetypal forms of the aboriginal past and their connotations find their place and offer additional sources of inspiration (or mere association) —as in the “primitive” igloo sculptures of glass and other materials by Mario Merz, which use the common associations of Inuit (Eskimo) life to represent our nomadic existence. This state of the arts appears to be worldwide.

To complete the picture we may finally point to postmodern music, which has the same situational and serial quality as the visual arts. Michael Nyman says of conceptual music that there is “a situation in which sounds may occur, a process of generating action

(sounding or otherwise), and a field delineated by certain compositional rules” (3). John Cage notes: “living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing is to open one’s ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one’s thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract or symbolical” (qtd. in Nyman 1). And finally we might listen to Karl-Heinz Stockhausen: “The work is composed in ‘moment form.’ Each moment, whether a state or a process, is individual and self-regulated, and able to sustain an independent existence. [...] rather the concentration on the Now —on ever Now —as if it were a vertical slice dominating over any horizontal conception of time and reaching into timelessness, which I call eternity: an eternity which does not begin at the end of time, but is attainable at every moment” (Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, qtd. in Butler 84).

### 3.2. The Framework of the Narrated Situation

In the case of literature, two conditioning circumstances should be kept in mind. First, the narrated situation is a narrative *constant*; it is foundational to fiction.<sup>17</sup> Consciousness and its product, fiction, are always anchored in situations which are isolated by division and negation and (re)connected by the “good” continuity of time, by reflection and imagination. Fiction has a location (Iser 1993, 167), or rather *is* a location, an actual site. It is so much dependent on being located that the narrated situation is not only the basic unit of the narrative location and of communication with the reader, but also one can even speak of narrative as the *situational transformation of (anti)meaning*. Second, the advent of what we call situationalism, i.e., the restriction or even abandonment of thematic and psychological codes in favor of the “autonomy” of the situation, is a *deformation*. Whatever deconstructs the patterns of continuity, coherence, and meaning acts as an elementary narrative force that deforms form. This requires some further clarification.

The concept of situation denotes, as all aesthetic terms should, an open structure, not a fixed content. It indicates a structurability that remains constant and at the same time allows for innumerable transformations. It is a model in the sense of “a design that something *else* is patterned after” (Goffman 1974, 41), and not a given reality. The narrated situation is more than an image. Sartre

maintains — in Iser’s words — that “images cannot be synthesized into a sequence, but one must continually abandon an image the moment one is forced by circumstances to produce a new one” (1978, 186). Though this is true of the image because it is defined by its sensory content, it is not so for the situation since it has the character of a prescribed form and is established by its non-effaceable constitutive elements, space, time, character, action/event. From the situation emerge all synthesizing narrative strategies like character, plot or theme. “Situation” is the most neutral, comprehensive, and flexible term for the basic unit of fiction, in which fiction takes on its pragmatic gestalt. The situation molds the shape of each version of the world by the actuality of its data. In fact, “fiction cannot be about anything nonactual” (Goodman 1984, 125),<sup>18</sup> i.e., non-situational. In the mobile syntagmatic system of the text, the actual given situation changes into another actual, formerly only possible, situation, which then gives up its actuality in favor of another situation, etc.

The “linguistic turn” in narrative and narratology, the claim that narrative, or rather the language of narrative, could refer to nothing but itself because the linguistic sign points only to other signs and does not have the ability to represent an outer world to which it has no access, of course overstates the case of language in the face of all common sense. But the premise that the idea of linguistic reference is an illusion, does not lessen the importance of the notion of situation and content in the analysis of narrative, for the situational orientation of narration is not to be seen from the perspective of a mimetologically oriented theory and does not follow mimetic thought. The deconstruction of the referentiality of language and sign by poststructuralists like Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, or Barthes<sup>19</sup> renders the concept of language absolute, but it does not deny its iconic, image- and situation-building faculty. This also holds true where the text itself, as in the case of the fantastic, is based on a different kind of logic and acquires an “irrealistic” quality (Barth). Whatever the opaqueness or fragmentation of language, its creative iconic energy causes the reader to conjure up — even if only in shifting fragments or collage-like combinations — framing images and situations. To be sure, the deconstructionists and writers like Gass and Federman pronounce language as the limit beyond which we cannot reach and make characters into “word-beings” (LeClair



and McCaffery 142) or “just one more linguistic source of energy — where the language comes from and where it is going” (Gass, in Ziegler and Bigsby 156). But that does not exclude the situational quality of linguistic energy. Federman, for instance, answers the question: “How does a book typically begin for you?” in terms of language: “All my books literally come to me in the form of a sentence, an original sentence which contains the entire book”. But these sentences are not just linguistic constructions; they in fact constitute, in spite of their if-form, situations with their illusions of time and space: “*The Twofold Vibration* began with the sentence: ‘If the night passes quietly tomorrow he will have reached the twenty-first century and be on his way ...’ [...] The first sentence that came to me and became *Double and Nothing* was: ‘If the room cost eight dollars a week then it will have to be noodles’” (LeClair and McCaffery 128). The sentence Federman begins his book with is not only a “visual image”, it constitutes a situation. And the situation creates the illusion of a world. He notes: “Naturally you can’t ever truly destroy illusions; as soon as you start reading you rebuild the world through my words and create a new system of illusions” (LeClair and McCaffery 128).

In contrast to starting the book with language, with the first sentence, there is another strategy: to begin with the story. This is central for another group of writers, for instance Barth and Coover. They make the narrated situation and its visual images the ground phenomena of their writing. As Coover says in an interview: “The central thing for me is story. [...] I know there’s a way of looking at fiction as being made up of words, and that therefore what you do with words becomes the central concern. But I’m much more interested in the way that fiction, for all its weaknesses, reflects something else — gesture, connections, paradox, story” (LeClair and McCaffery 69). All postmodern writers would agree to what Gass has to say — “What you want to do is to create a work that can be read non-referentially” (LeClair and McCaffery 164) — but such a work would still be read situationally.

The situation in fiction is double-poled: it is *form* as order and *force* as disorder (the term *force* will be defined below). This indissoluble duality gives it its operational power. Considered as *form*, the constituents of the situation are *space* and *time*; *character* and *action/event*. They form minimal consistencies without which no

experience and no representation of experience are possible, and they ensure the coexistence of mobilization and immobilization. Being an abstraction, and a design, the situation pertains as matrix both to experiential reality and the worlds of memory and imagination, i.e., art. In a formal model of the situation that focuses on its basic properties, the four elements make up an abstract correlation of prerequisites and conditions, the general components of a structure; as structure they form a totality, are transformable and regulate themselves (Piaget 1971, 44). The components of the situation are defined in relation to one another and constitute — in various combinations — interrelations of causality, correspondence, interaction or conditioning, or, under the impact of *force*, stimulate the energetics of the situation, disrupt these interrelations, which they, however, cannot but create. Space, time, character, action/event are “schematized” (Ingarden) by selection, combination, substitution, and context-building (Jakobson); they are “filled”, foreshortened, transformed or even deleted; yet they still are indissoluble and guarantee, by their own “good” continuation, the continuation of the textual world from one situation to the next. They can be broken up but remain present even *ex negativo* as the horizon of the situational construct and its sequence, shaped by the changing focus of narration.

The situation as form acts like a *frame*. The frame theory, in this case Goffman’s concept of frame, helps to understand the constitution and deformation of the narrated situation, its centerment and decenterment. In his book, *Frame Analysis*, Goffman speaks of “two broad classes of primary frameworks: natural and social” (22). The natural primary framework would in our terms encompass the elementary components, space and time, and the more complex ones, character and action/event: “Natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, ‘purely physical.’ Such unguided events are ones understood to be due totally, from start to finish, to ‘natural’ determinants” (22). “Social frameworks”, on the other hand, “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency” (22). However, the central assumption (pointing to the necessity of an integrated situational context) is that “although natural events occur without intelligent intervention, intelligent doings cannot be accomplished effectively without

entrance into the natural order” (23). The situation as force can change this relationship of dominance. Although the more complex, social framework (character, action), relies on the natural framework (space, time), which is the more elementary one, the *force* factor may deform this relationship. What is called the social frame might be reduced to the natural frame; in other words, it might become undirected, unoriented, unguided, or mechanized, and the natural frame might take on some of the characteristics of the social frame like will, and the controlling effort of the intelligence. Dismissal of the formally operative hierarchies in the interplay between form and force would level out whatever differences there are among the elements. As a result, the situation would be *decentered* or rather “deformed” in that the expected dominance relationships between social and natural worlds and with them the reign of elements like character and plot and of concepts like reality, truth, and identity would be suspended.

The viewpoint of the recipient is also situational. He or she perceives not only a composition of linguistic signs, but also a world, a world as form. As Gurwitsch says in his *Field of Consciousness*, “the perception of the words arouses and supports specific acts of meaning-apprehension. However, the perceived words belong in no way to the meaning apprehended through those acts” (263). Since “the codes of fiction are tied to our perceptual system as well as to our language” (Scholes and Hernadi 239), the pleasures of reading are not just pleasures of language and form, but actually originate from, in Bakhtin’s words, “those aspects in the life of the word [...] that exceed [...] the boundaries of linguistics” (181). The reader’s interaction with the text creates a world in a “narrative communication situation” (Rimmon-Kenan 86), in what Wolfgang Iser calls a “situational frame”. This frame is meant to “reduce the indeterminacies” of the world by giving them form (1978, 66).<sup>20</sup> The reader does not only react passively to the narrated situations, he activates his own situational- form potential. While the world projection in the text creates a more or less informative scaffolding of situations, the reader responds to this information with his own scripts, frames, and schemata of world knowledge. A script is a “description of how a sequence of events is expected to unfold [...] A script is similar to a frame in that it [the script] represents a set of expectations”. Frames differ from scripts in that frames are used to

represent a point in time. Scripts represent a sequence of events that take place in a time sequence. Schema, a term used in psychology and referring to memory patterns that humans use to interpret current experiences, is “a synonym for framelike structures” (Mercadal 255, 254). The “experiential repertoire” thus contains both static (schematic, framelike) and dynamic (scriptlike) types of expectations (Herman 1049).<sup>21</sup> The stories presented stand in a mutual relationship with the pre-fabricated knowledge and disposition of the recipient who is used to perceiving, inferring, and reflecting from pre-stored groupings of causally and chronologically ordered occurrences. The more the backdrops of belief and expectation, the scripts, frames and schemata of the reader’s repertoire of experience, and world knowledge are deconstructed by the actual composition of the current narrative situation, the more the unusual, the remarkable and the complex come to the fore. They complicate the reconciliation between the expected and the emergent situation, as well as the organization of situations into sequentially and causally, in short, meaningfully organized wholes. The recipient’s repertoire of links and analogies then proves to be an outmoded framework. It becomes necessary to rethink the problem of the interface of script and story, of the general and basic processing mechanism, and the cognitive resources. A failure to evaluate the sequence of situations in terms of coherence and consistency leads to an appropriation of only the minimal constituents of the situation and the interruption of contact with antecedent and consequent. The difficulty, even impossibility of grasping a logical succession compels the recipients to process the text within situationalist limits, or rather forces them to establish their own pattern of (irrealist, non-causal) connections. That is what happens in much of postmodern fiction.

The concept of situation is defined not only by form but also by *force*. Form contains and encloses force, while force dispossesses form, frame, and fixities by becoming transience and energy. Art as force has been discussed by Heidegger, Vattimo, Serres, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Brooks, and others, who more or less draw on Nietzsche’s “critique of the highest values hitherto” and his “principles of a new evaluation”. In *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche sets the “desire for becoming” (432) against “being”, force against form, asserting that it is essential “to start from the *body* and employ it as a guide” (289), that the condition of art is “an explosive

condition” (421), which transports energy and plenitude and “superabundance” (434), causes a “necessary overflowing of all limits” (422), and “appears in man like a force of nature” (420). But, as Heidegger — reproachfully — remarks, force is for Nietzsche not a “sheer upsurge of the Dionysian upon which one might ride” but it in fact becomes form as the expression of the victory of force. Form is “the enclosing limit or boundary, what brings and stations a being into that which it is”; it is that which contains force. Force so to speak self-masters itself in form. “[T]he created thing [force] is to be restrained, overcome and surpassed” (1991, 88, 129). Vattimo in turn criticizes Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche and lays stress on the fact that Nietzsche emphasized the “dionysiac residuum, a form of liberty of the spirit”, and its liberation from rationalism and metaphysics, and that he later in fact discovered that form was force too, that the “alleged ‘values’ and metaphysical structures are just a play of forces [...] rather than orders corresponding to ‘values’” (1993, 88, 93-94), and that art thus is “a pulsive mechanism with a destructuring effect”; it “breaks up the subject’s established hierarchies” (99-100). Form is thus “forever being exploded by a play of forces, of particular forces, namely the body’s instincts, sensuality and animal vitality” (105).

We do not need to follow this argument in more detail. What is important is that force and form, mobility and stasis, have to be taken together, that their opposition and interface, namely the working of form as exaltation of force, and force as a “destructuring” and restructuring of form, create a paradox that defines the narrated situation as well as the interaction of situations and the organization of the whole text. Nietzsche writes of the “[f]ascination of the opposing point of view”, the “refusal to be deprived of the stimulus of the enigmatic” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power* 1968, 262).<sup>22</sup> In his essay “Force and Signification”, Derrida states:

Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an *economy* escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions. This economy would not be an energetics of pure, shapeless force. The differences

examined *simultaneously* would be differences of site and differences of force (1978, 19-20).<sup>23</sup>

In turn, Peter Brooks, writing about “the dynamic aspect of narrative”, psychologizes force, makes the situation a field of energetics, the “field of force”, which bundles the “textual energies”, and differentiates “that which was previously undifferentiated” (xiii, 47, 101, 12).

In fiction, force is embedded in the “energetic materiality” of the situation and generates the latter’s qualitative transformation that “overspills form” by the “materiality in movement” (Deleuze and Guattari 1993, 114, 408). It alerts us to incompleteness and mobility, to the discharge of desire for movement and the other, to the dialectic relation between determination and becoming. As force, the situation produces an incongruence of items, a disorder of fragments, which Foucault calls “heterotopia”, a “disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclitite*; [...] in such a state, things are ‘laid,’ ‘placed,’ ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all” (1970, xvii-xviii). Strengthened are the “inessential”, non-structurable and non-teleological, the actual density and opacity of the thing seen, the non-order of contingency, and chance. The heterogeneous lines of force create alterity, continuous change, disrupt and transcend the stasis of segmentarity by a new “nomadism” (Deleuze), a polyphony of thought, so that the “perpetual living present” of the situation surpasses invariant structures and well-determined schemes of signification. This perpetually living present manifests the “natural tendency of the book” to disclose itself “only in successive fragments” (Derrida 1978, 20-21).

It is obvious that postmodern fiction privileges the force factor of narration, the energetics of the situational field, to which also belong the multiplicity and exchangeability of perspective. The situational field underlines the significance of sensory experience and of desire, the importance of a multiplicity of viewpoints, and the decomposition of continuation, i.e., the weakening of the transsituational, synthesizing influence of character, plot, and theme. As Hawkes says, “[m]y fiction is almost totally visual, and the language depends almost totally on image”, and this visual quality of

language “depend[s] on my feeling for dreams and on my interest in exploiting the richness and energy of the unconscious”, and on “the dreamlike conflicts out of which I try to make narrative fiction” (Bellamy 1974, 103, 104). In a similar vein Sukenick writes: “Start with immediate situation. One scene after another, disparate, opaque, absolutely concrete. Later, a fable, a gloss, begins to develop, abstractions appear” (*DN* 154); John Barth notes the fact that “it is also important to ‘keep the senses operating,’” for “the reader’s imagination is oriented to the scene, perhaps unconsciously” (*LF* 70). Elkin speaks of his characters’ obsessions: “what we read about now — and what I write about — are people whose wills have been colored by some perfectly irrational desire. In the case of Boswell, it is the will to live forever. In the case of Dick Gibson, it is the will to live the great life that is the trite life. In the case of the ‘The Bailbondsmen,’ it is to know the answers to questions that no one can know. In the case of Ashenden in ‘The Making of Ashenden,’ it is the desire to find an absolutely pure human being — someone as pure as himself [...] Their obsessions drive them” (LeClair and McCaffery 117-118). What Cage has said of Rauschenberg’s *Inferno* drawings, that their subject is “a situation involving multiplicity”, is also the ground phenomenon of postmodern fiction (qtd. in Alloway 1975, 132), except that in narrative one situation turns into another.

The fact that the situation is isolated, deformed, and decentered, that the time sequences, and the intersequential relations lack order and meaning, is seen to be, as already mentioned, a reflection of the state of affairs in the lifeworld and of course call forth mixed reactions. William Gass comments in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*: “Our world [...] lacks significance; it lacks connection” (57). In his novel *The Tunnel*, Kohler speaks of the “composure of decomposition. Bits and pieces. That’s the picture” (373). In Pynchon’s terms, this world is full of “strange inconsistencies” (*MD* 632). In Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy is “spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next [...] never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (20). Elkin notes the whimsicality of life and art and says, “I do regard my ‘art’ as totally arbitrary” (Ziegler and Bigsby 103). Robert Coover writes in his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*, which might be cited as his poetological statement: “Games are what kept Miller going [...] Miller perceived existence as a loose concatenation

of separate and ultimately inconsequential instants". In Coover's *The Public Burning* it is said that "[t]here are sequences but no causes, continuities but no connections" (236-37). Hawkes, for his part, says in an early interview: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (Dembo and Pondrom 11); and when asked in another interview about "a consciously held theoretical position", he added: "fiction "should be an act of rebellion against all the constraints of the conventional pedestrian mentality around us. Surely it should destroy conventional morality" (Bellamy 1974, 108). Federman opts for liberation by fragmentation: "the elements of the new fictitious discourse (words, phrases, sequences, scenes, spaces, etc.) must become digressive from one another — digressive from the element that precedes and the element that follows. In fact, these elements will now occur simultaneously and offer multiple possibilities of rearrangement in the process of reading" (1975, 11). The postmodern writers accept or even celebrate chaos as force in life and fiction, a trend that we will document in detail at another point of our argument. Hawkes, for instance, says of his works that "in each there is a sense of closure and then a sudden suggestion of expansion towards nothingness that will once again or soon again be filled with chaos" (Ziegler and Bigsby 175). Chiding the postmodernists for their lack of moral concern, the traditionalist John Gardner says that "chaos gets overadvertised" (LeClair and McCaffery 30).

Gaddis's early novel from the fifties, *The Recognitions*, marks the transition between modernism and postmodernism. What Federman, like Sukenick, Hawkes, and others, celebrates as new freedom, the artist-figure Stanley in *The Recognitions* complains about quite in the spirit of modernism. While their statements mark the difference between modernism and postmodernism, Stanley criticizes the loss of the modernist totalizing position, which, however, as this novel and Pynchon's fictions attest to, need not be given up in the New Fiction, may even be welcome as an additional perspective, though it is pushed into the background or appears as a "minus function" (Lotman). According to Stanley:

That's what it is, a disease, you can't live like we do without catching it. Because we get time given to us in fragments, that's the only way we know it. Finally we can't even conceive of a continuum of time. Every fragment exists by itself, and that's why we live among palimpsests,



because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and it's impossible now, it's impossible, because of the breakage, there are pieces everywhere (*Rec* 657).

The narrator in *The Recognitions* remarks that “consciousness, it seemed, was a succession of separate particles, being carried along on the surface of the deep and steady unconscious flow of life, of time itself” (58); “every fragment of reality intrudes on its own terms, separately clattering in and the mind tries to grasp each one as it passes, sensing that these things could be understood one by one and unrelated” (431); the streets are filled with “people for whom time was not continuum of disease but relentless repetition of consciousness and unconsciousness, unrelated as day and night or black and white, evil and good, in independent alternation, like the life and death of insects” (78). In spite of these complaints and the thematizing of the identity problems of the protagonist, *The Recognitions* mirrors the indicted state of affairs and follows the style of postmodern fragmentation: it demonstrates the fragmentation of situations and, as in the following example, the disconnection of situations by using a diagrammatic style:

Fruit stores were busy. Taxi drivers were busy. Trains were crowded, in both directions. Accident wards were inundated. Psychoanalysts received quivering visits from old clients. Newspaper reporters dug up and wrote at compassionate length of gas-filled rooms, Christmas tree fires and blood shed under mistletoe, puppydogs hung in stockings and cats hung in telephone wires, in what where called human interest stories (112).

Force first of all is the negation of the fixed, the unmovable form. With the emphasis on force the paradigms of fiction change the structure that orders the narrative argument, that judges, confirms, and negates values. Doubt enters the situation. One can perceive this stage of development in a historical context that shows an increasing deconstruction of the paradigms of order. Historically, American literature appears to apply three (interrelated) paradigms of form and order: (1) a system of universal dualisms, building upon the elementary opposition of good and evil, nature and civilization, knowledge and non-knowledge, identity and nonidentity; (2) the national contrast between the American Dream and the American reality, between the humanistic ideals of freedom, equality and happiness for all and the failure to realize them in the New World;

and (3) the difference between appearance and reality, which is the paradigm of the European realist novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and which is directed towards the analysis of the relationship between the individual and society, and the investigation of moral standards and moral hypocrisy. This reality-appearance paradigm attained a stronger presence in America since Howells and the appearance of the realistic/naturalistic American novel (though Melville already indicted moral hypocrisy but with reference mostly to the American dream or universal aspects of human behavior). The combination of the three paradigms in the *modern* American novel has been the basis of its strength (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, etc.).

The paradigm of *postmodern* fiction is “*disappearance*”.<sup>24</sup> It questions the hierarchies, fixities and definites that form the basis of ideals, of dualisms, and of universal “truth”, as well as of the logical, the “real” and the probable, which are also constitutive perspectives of narrative, that focus the situation and its elements, space, time, character and action/event (plot). In Federman’s words: “Like a painter wanting to erase the scene or the portrait, we wanted to erase the words, the story, the people, from our writing” (LeClair and McCaffery 150). Sukenick notes, “the world is changing, there are new circumstances that demand new paradigms [...] The effort at control is hopeless”. Answering the question as to what a new model might be, Sukenick emphasizes “participation”, meaning participation in the flow of life and the text (LeClair and McCaffery 287). The new circumstances Sukenick speaks of, Baudrillard sees in the fact that the social sphere has disappeared, that “there is no longer even any social referent of the classical kind (a people, a class, a proletariat, objective conditions)” (1983a, 19). What remains are mere *simulations* of social reality (see the discussion of Baudrillard’s positions above). Accordingly, “[p]ostmodernity [...] is a game with the vestiges of what has been destroyed. This is why we are ‘post’ — history has stopped, one is in a kind of post-history which is without meaning” (1984, 25).

Though one may stop short of Baudrillard’s one-dimensional, exaggeratedly bleak view of post-history,<sup>25</sup> one must admit that important aspects of the social world have disappeared, not only in the lifeworld but in postmodern fiction, too. The

disappearance paradigm has been effective in decomposing systems of order and narrative form in fiction on various levels. It has manifested itself (1) in the disappearance of thematic structure, which is based directly upon relevant epistemological and ethical notions about the human being and the world, and reveals itself not in a character, a social context or a plot alone, but in the meaningful synthesis of the narrated world as a whole. The new paradigm shows itself also (2) in the disappearance of social formations, i.e., of the social level of character and action, which not only contribute to the overall thematic structure, but also have a status and function of their own. They offer in the syntagmatic development a potential of sympathetic and moral identification as well as of distancing judgments. Finally, the disappearance mode brings about also (3) the decomposition of the centered structure of the narrated situation, and a randomization of its elements, space, time, character, and action/event. The result of this extreme postmodern development is that narrated and narrating situation become “plastic and manipulable”, and “heterogeneous, ambiguous, pluralized” (Gibson 12).<sup>26</sup>

### **3.3. Form as Self-Reflexivity, Narrative Pattern, Collage, Rhythm, Theme, and Perspective**

Force deconstructs form, and yet force also creates form. As mentioned, Nietzsche came to understand that force deconstructs form but then masters itself as form and that, conversely, forms are the manifestations of force. The opposition of form and force is pronounced but also diffused in postmodern fiction. The activities of force decompose form, and they are contained in form. This occurs in a number of ways. First, as argued above, though the situation is perpetually in construction, it is always a site and as such has an actual form. It is an outline of changing axes, but always within the scheme of the constitutive situational elements, space, time, character, action/event, which almost automatically build up a network of relations that are interpretable. The framework of constitutive elements and relations forms the determinate site for the interplay of, and struggle between, often mutually exclusive positions, the co-presence of differentiation and dedifferentiation, diversity, and sameness, the energetic combinations of an infinite variety of possibilities, open to “any imaginable kind of

confabulation without constraint”, establishing “abstract collections of states of affairs” (Pavel 2, 50). Second, no narrative representation of a situation is without evaluation, and evaluation is form. The situation interprets the given, attributes the modalities of freedom, necessity, and chance to what happens, in fact holds together, in spite of the pressure on its compositional form, heterogeneous drives without their ceasing to be heterogeneous (by the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships [...] artistically exposed” [Bakhtin 291-92]). Furthermore, non-totalizing, subversive perspectives like play, irony, parody, and the comic mode come to mediate between opposites and break up barriers between “inside” and “outside” in the attempt to create the attitude of an as-well-as instead of the modernist either-or. “The serious novel” is for Federman “the playful novel” (LeClair and McCaffery 140), a position with which practically all his colleagues would agree. The result is a *multi-form* that replaces the hierarchy of forms and surpasses the doublet content and form. As Gass says, “For me any piece is a play of various forms against one another. When I am playing with forms, it is often simply to find a form for something odd like the garbage” (LeClair and McCaffery 166).

With and beyond these general formative influences and strategies, the postmodern writers develop their own notions and practices of form, through which, more than through anything else, they come into their artistic individuality. Yet all these forms have a common feature in that they are reductions of totalizing forms. These new forms and the concepts behind them become distinct when one sets them against a full, totalizing model of pure form, in which form (almost) eliminates force, for instance in modernist symbolic constellations. What the negentropic postmodern narrative strategies of storytelling strive to overcome is illustrated by the entropic counter-model that Vonnegut provides in the science fiction part of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The narrative form cultivated by the inhabitants of the extraterrestrial planet Tralfamadore eliminates time, separation, and temporal sequence, and the dynamics of life in general, factors which would individualize the situation and would open it to the varieties of feelings and thoughts, to desire and strife, joy and pain, anxiety and assurance. Sequentiality is replaced in Tralfamadore with simultaneity and synchronicity. All situations of past, present, and future, emptied of redundancies and focused on the

essentials of being, are seen simultaneously, thus forming a whole that is, however, an uncentered whole. It is accepted, indeed never questioned, in its status or function by “why-questions”. It sounds in some passages like a parody of an exaggerated, totalizing, modernist form, the so-called “spatial” form, in which everything is interconnected with everything else and directed towards the depth view, be it centered in the essence of world or in the essential subjectivity of the self:

each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message — describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time (76).

Simultaneity is an important value in postmodern fiction, but it is a simultaneity combined with, and challenged by, the dynamics of change that thwarts closure. Federman remarks: “My books grow from the inside, not necessarily growing from left to right, in one direction, but also from right to left, up and down and sideways [...] [M]y books never look like finished products” (LeClair and McCaffery 130). The Tralfamadorian novel demonstrates a concept that is illusionary, not even acceptable for humans; it excludes half of the human destiny, the dynamics of energy and force, of tension and struggle.

Postmodern fiction answers the requirement of form in two ways. On a meta-level of *self-reflexivity*, art self-interrogates its status as art and its forms. Or as a narrative mode, it establishes designs and patterns that order (even in disorder) the flow of narrative in the text. Self-reflexivity of course needs to combine with narrative, as Barth does. Coover argues for self-reflexivity: “If storytelling is central to the human experience, stories about storytelling, or stories which talk about themselves as stories, become central, too. For a while anyway” (LeClair and McCaffery 68). The reason for self-reflexivity, for the reflection on narrative patterns and strategies without and within the text, may be, again in Coover’s words, “the human need for pattern, and language’s propensity, willy-nilly, for supplying it” (LeClair and McCaffery 68);

Coover confirms the relevance of this kind of aesthetic self-reflexivity, together with the moral value of narrative, by arguing that narrative is an anthropological constant and requires not only practice but also theoretical reflection on its rules: “Who’s to say [...] that self-reflexive fiction, dealing as it assumes it does with a basic human activity, is not, by examining that activity as it celebrates it, engaged in a very moral act?” (68) The accusation that self-reflexive fiction is narcissistic Sukenick counters by placing self-reflexivity in the all-important context of play and consciousness: “narcissism is good. [...] It teaches people how to play with themselves”, and “self-reflexivity is a path — maybe the only path — to great consciousness” (LeClair and McCaffery 289). Federman makes an important distinction even though it is doubtful that his prophecy has come true: “For a while we had something like *self-consciousness*, and now we have more of a *self-consciousness*. The two terms are not yet separated, but they have achieved a different kind of balance, so that we are going to have much more *consciousness*, much more *reflexiveness* (in the sense of thinking), much more awareness in the novel, with a lesser emphasis on the self” (LeClair and McCaffery 141).

It appears that, for many postmodern writers, narrative only reveals its wisdom when one breaks it down by reflection or distortion. Only by deforming and transforming narrative can be released “its energy, suggestiveness, its possibilities” (Sukenick). Form here emerges out of a conceptual control that includes the lack of control (or dies-control or anti-control), that opens the possibility of play, of play with tension and fusion, with simultaneity and sequentiality without final synthesis. Several of the postmodern writers, however, dispense with self-reflexivity or meta-fiction. For instance, though he tried to develop a taste for it in *Snow White*, Barthelme does not have “any great enthusiasm for fiction-about-fiction” or meta-fiction and thinks that terms like “surfiction” and “superfiction” are “terrible” (LeClair and McCaffery 38). And Elkin notes: “The Barth who takes himself seriously as a metafictionist is a Barth who bores finally [...] later Barth really is Barth for Barth’s sake” (LeClair and McCaffery 110). Barth, too, points to the danger of boredom, though he does not take himself too seriously as a metafictionist, at least not in attitude. Preferring “the aesthetic pleasure of complexity, of complication” (Bellamy 1974, 7), which is

his trade-mark, he pleads for a third code, or rather for third and fourth codes, in addition to the double-take of self-reflexivity: "I myself like a kind of fiction that, if it's going to be self-conscious, is at least comic about its own self-consciousness. Otherwise, self-consciousness can be a bloody bore. What is more loathsome than the self-loathing of a self one loathes?" (Bellamy 1974, 11). We have then (1) the narrative, (2) the self-conscious reflection on the narrative, (3) the playful attitude necessary to combine the two, and (4) for distance and entertainment purposes, the comic mode. Sukenick adds a further dimension, for, as he points out, "'reflection' goes two ways — there's the pun on reflection as careful thought [...] part of the reflection is the work reflecting itself". Reflection can become a mirroring effect of the narrative, as in *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, where "part of the reflection is the work reflecting itself: the book has two parts, with a blank in the middle, which is like a mirror in that on either side the parts reflect one another, repeat one another" (LeClair and McCaffery 290-91).

When *pattern* is the issue, it is contrasted to but also interfused with *debris*, cliché, waste, and chaos. As Mason says to himself in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, "Stars and Mud ever conjugate, a Paradox to consider" (724). According to Gass, "[t]he text is both a path through time and a pile of debris" (LeClair and McCaffery 171). Hawkes argues for pattern or design and debris. He aims at "a formalizing of our deepest urgencies"; and this explains why he negates theme, character, and plot as surface coherences, yet reasserts the necessity of "structure", i.e., the necessity of the conscious act of art to give the drives of the unconscious "a significant shape",<sup>27</sup> or "parallelism" because "the unconscious coheres totally" (Ziegler and Bigsby 172). And this significant shape is the fusion of "design and debris", to use the programmatic formulation from *Travesty*. Hawkes sees his work in terms of "conscious control and conscious manipulation", "as a continuum of recurrent images, obsessive thematic concerns, repeated form"; and he asserts that his obsessive thematic concern "after *The Lime Twig* has been the imagination itself", which, however, has a double, destructive/reconstructive function, for "annihilation is the term of the imagination". Thus "the creative power and the destructive power" combine (Ziegler and Bigsby 174, 177, 179, 180). In Elkin's view, life is shapeless, but art, "as everybody knows, is shaped". He

notes: “I *am* concerned with structure and form and my novels *are* structured and formed” (LeClair and McCaffery 112-113). The basis of their structure and form is the “physics of obsession” (113). But then it is paradoxically the *cliché* that contains form, “the real truth”. What *The Dick Gibson Show* is about is “that the great life was the life of cliché” (116). “That’s what it’s all about, to find the truth hiding in clichés” (Ziegler and Bigsby 108). Though triteness is transcended by form, “the kernel of organization is still trite. It’s still triteness itself” (108).

Yet the positions vary widely when it comes to particulars. For Gass, to whom “[s]tyle seems [...] to be the ultimately important thing about a writer”, clichés, “are indeed the enemy; they are anybody’s; they are thoughtless counters; they don’t reflect the particular” (Ziegler and Bigsby 159, 158). Sukenick by no means wants “to indulge people’s fantasies [...] I don’t want to present people with illusions, and I don’t want to let them off cheaply by releasing their [clichéd] fantasies in an easy way”. And he claims that “fiction should tell the truth” (Bellamy 1974, 71, 69). So here we go back to truth, but truth now comprises contrasting, even mutually exclusive, in spite of their similarity, different things: design and debris, Stars and Mud, verity and cliché, style and content. Again we recognize the paradox as ground figuration, now of the truth and of its form, structure or pattern. The debate about the form of Form continues with the other writers.

Coover opts for structure, because it can be manipulated: “though structure is not profoundly meaningful in itself, I love to use it. This has been the case ever since the earliest things I wrote when I made an arbitrary commitment to design. The reason is not that I have some notion of an underlying ideal order which fiction imitates, but a delight with the rich ironic possibilities that the use of structure affords. [...] The Henry book [*The Universal Baseball Association*] came into being when I found a simple structural key to the metaphor of a man throwing dice for a baseball game he has made up” (Gado 148-49). The similarity to Barth’s ideas Coover himself recognizes. Barth says that he wants to transform the clichés of traditional fiction by being “passionately formal” (LeClair and McCaffery 17). He is “of the temper that chooses to ‘rebel along traditional lines’” (71), also the traditional lines of form; he speaks, as French authors also do, of the “used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of



certain possibilities” (64) of the novel, but still wants to keep all possibilities of “story” and “discourse” open for further experiments with double-coding. He writes *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* as “novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author” (72). The result is for him “to try to abstract the patterns [...] to follow the patterns” and by following it “to parody the patterns” (Bellamy 1974, 13), so that it can become an operational matrix for his own narrative. Barth, however, has the feeling that form and force cannot be balanced by metafictional strategies or the play with patterns and form alone, but need to involve content, in fact desire and emotion. He notes: “I have at times gone farther than I want to go in the direction of a fiction that foregrounds language and form, displacing the ordinary notion of content, of ‘aboutness.’ But beginning with the *Chimera* novellas — written after the *Lost in the Funhouse* series, where that foregrounding reaches its peak or its nadir, depending on one’s aesthetic — “I have wanted my stories to be *about* things: about the passions, which Aristotle tells us are the true subject of literature. I’m with Aristotle on that” (LeClair and McCaffery 17).

Barthelme’s specific answer to the question of form in fiction is *collage*. Asked to elaborate on his statement that “[t]he principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century”, he says: “I was probably wrong, or too general”, but then explains: “The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may be also much else. It’s an *itself*, if it’s successful” (Bellamy 1974, 51-52). What the collage of unlike things represents in terms of form is the non-orderability of the world. It is anti-form that, however, *ex negativo* is form, or rather, the “minus function” (Lotman) of form or indeed a new form. Gass writes: “Let nothing be lost. Waste not even waste. Thus collage is the blessed method: never cut when you can paste. No question it works. It works wonders, because in collage logical levels rise and fall like waves” (1979, 282). The underlying psychic state that allots significance to collage as form is what Barthelme calls “anxiety”, which is the fear of and confrontation with disconnection: “Maybe I should have said that anxiety is the central principle of all art in the etc., etc?” (Bellamy 1974, 52) Federman uses the terms collage and montage for

describing his own ordering principles: “What you finally read in the published text is what’s been collaged and montaged” (LeClair and McCaffery 132). Sukenick says that he makes use of constructive “geometrical patterns” or “arithmetical patterns” in *Up and Out* (LeClair and McCaffery 290), and goes on to say that “you simply impose a form on your materials, it not really mattering how this form was generated” (291), and that “a truly nontraditional form would probably be an arbitrary form” (292) (to which Elkin would agree). This “idiosyncratic form” that “releases my imagination” (292) has much to do with collage and “play”.

*Rhythm* is another term that is important. Barthelme, Gass, Federman, and Sukenick “pay a great deal of attention to rhythm” (Bellamy 1974, 52, 34; LeClair and McCaffery 129, 291), which, as an ordering principle, is a calculated combination of repetition and variation, and “imitates” life as form. Gass revives the concept of *beauty* in a somewhat Kantian sense (“I am a Kantian”) to indicate symmetry, balance and order. “Old romantic that I am, I would like to add objects to the world worthy of love. [...] My particular aim is that it be loved because it is so beautiful in itself, something that exists simply to be experienced. So the beauty has to come first” (LeClair and McCaffery 23). It has to come first because it avoids and transcends generalizations and clichés, for “[b]eauty always brings things back to itself” (Ziegler and Bigsby 161), and also, because, by means of the “aesthetic mode”, it transfers beliefs and “the various systems” of philosophy into form, not because they are truths, but because of their “great magnificence” as “work[s] of great art” (166-67). Hawkes employs the words “beauty” and “beautiful” for the expression of form and design, but he is thinking of a design that would “liberate the kind of energy” and would “uncover the kinds of material that seem desperately and beautifully essential to us as readers”, that would “reveal the essential beauty of the ugly” (Bellamy 1974, 104-105). Gass’s quite conscious emphasis on the particular and his choice of the term beautiful suggest (just as Hawkes’s phrasings do) the *symbolic* method, which he — just as many of his colleagues, Hawkes, Barth, Brautigan, Pynchon, Elkin, etc. — makes use of for purposes of form and significance. And one must again add play, irony, parody, which as evaluative perspectives form the built-up rhythms, designs, patterns, collages, etc. To quote Sukenick again: “Language play releases the possibility of meaning

that is inherent in language, that is built up in it through tradition. The wisdom of language only reveals itself, oddly, when you break it down” (LeClair and McCaffery 283).

Of course, force and form have to interface to establish new form. As already mentioned, the new basic, structuring form is the specific postmodern form of the (double-coded) paradox, which we will later use to illustrate postmodern aesthetic practice in a nutshell. Here it may suffice to demonstrate how form and force separate and interact in the *actual* and the *possible*, and in the transformation of *theme*. In the actual, form and force meet. While the actual enacts a world in the form of a given situation and limits the reign of the possible, of force, it at the same time affirms the plenum of (other) possibilities, because in the actual (in contrast to the “real”) there are no a priori boundaries separating it from the possible. This is the reason why the postmodern writers react so strongly against the terms “real” and “reality”; they exclude the movement of force in favor of one form, while the actual includes mobility as the possible, which is the signum of energy and the aim of desire. The actual presupposes and points to the possible, and the possible enforces its entry into the actual. In its double coding, “[f]iction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction”; it “takes and unmakes and remakes and retakes familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite, but eventually recognizable — i.e. *re-cognizable* — ways” (Goodman 1978, 104-5). “The actual world [in fiction] is produced from [the] plenum of possibilia, selected by input and intention”. Conversely, “[p]ossibility is *implicate existence*. Actuality depends on a process of unfolding enfolded order to explicate existence” (Globus 136). In narrative, actuality unfolds out of and turns into possibility in the sequence and change of concrete situations. Actuality replaces reality in fiction; reality can appear only as the *idea* of the real.

Between actuality and possibility is the *pause*. The process of isolating and joining situations establishes and fills the “*blankness*” (Goodman). However, the latter, even in a virtual state, remains potent as silence, as an alternative to the world-making through pragmatic gestalts. Barth says: “We remember Beckett: ‘that silence out of which the universe is made.’ Plot and perhaps overingeniousness are a shore against that silence” (LeClair and McCaffery 15). And Hawkes speaks of “the power of unlimited

possibility and the nothingness that is the context of all creativity” (Ziegler and Bigsby 178), which he notes is held in balance by art. Nothingness, or, in compositional terms, the “pause” or “blank”, are special forms of difference within the situation and between situations; they serve to incorporate the unknown within the known, the inexpressible within the expressible, the possible within the actual, and thus serve force, the energetics of narrative. Situated in the pause and the blankness between the situations is the potential of both *difference* and *synthesis*. Difference produces force, synthesis form. Narrative defines its world-making not as intrinsic gestalt but as difference and struggle, as what Goodman calls “*differentialism*” (1984, 15). But again, difference is ambivalent as narrative is. Difference “as an empty space operates both as a divider and as a stimulus for the linking of what has been divided” (Iser 1993, 229). The colliding of the two impulses transfers the doubling structure of the situation (form-force) into the pause between the situations, which elicits the double process of separating and linking situational entities, of concealing and revealing connections and contextual references.

The most encompassing form of linking situations is *theme*. The text in its temporal extension establishes transsituational form in terms of continuities, coherences, and contexts that take on the function of theme. The end of thematics, which is the widest-reaching synthesis of form is not feasible, and neither is the end of the constituents of the narrated situation. Yet force as part of form transforms the binarism of thematic conceptualization. Postmodern themes have little to do with the integrating role that traditional and modern “essentializing” themes play. The quest for identity is no longer the thematic deep or super structure<sup>28</sup> that controls the selection and combination process of narrative, and it no longer steers the meaning-building procedure in the syntagmatic sequence of the narrated situations.<sup>29</sup> Theme in postmodern experimental fiction is no longer thinkable as “an imaginary, intentional or lived domain beyond all textual instances” (Derrida 1988a, 251), because it would “stabilize [the] undecidable” in “the mode of *pro et contra*” (1979b, 63). Force in the postmodern novel negates the static, taxonomic theme expressed in a challenge of opposites, of totalizing dialectics, and a centered concept of structure. Refuting the rationalizing, generalizing, and codifying constraints that obstruct the

principle of incertitude and the free-floating temporal process, John Hawkes, for instance, claims: "I would never begin a fiction with 'big themes' in mind" (Bellamy 1974, 107).

But even under these deconstructive circumstances, form as theme is not inactive; it restructures its own repertoire. It demonstrates that the crisis of meaning in narrative also provides the means for managing and instrumentalizing that crisis. While in postmodern fiction the human faculties are confronted with their own limitations and open up beyond their limits vast areas of the unknown and the inaccessible, what is thematized are no longer issues like identity and wholeness, but "différance", a "movement that consists in deferring [meaning] by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving", a movement "which differentiates" (Derrida 1981, 8-9). This mode of differentiation does not summarize, neither in terms of character and plot, nor in those of a codifying, bipolar theme. "Themes" are now the disruptive energetics of the text, the *abstract forces of irreality and possibility, discontinuity and indeterminacy, fluidity* and (the fear of) *entropy* as such, as "truths", which are manifested and concretized in the sequence of situations, their decenterment, the deferral of meaning which nowhere comes to rest, to closure. Gass remarks "that the writer is concerned with the exhibition of objects, thoughts, feelings, and actions where they are free from the puzzling disorders of the real and the need to come to conclusions about them" (Bellamy 1974, 33). But this accentuation of force by avoiding the "puzzling disorders of the real" and "conclusions about them" would be, in Nietzsche's terms, just a self-mastering of force as (abstract) form. The problem is the concretization of this kind of theme, of the content, the story, and the character.

There is obviously no way to thematize these "abstract" forces without their concretization via character. Character is split into the "idea" of character (in the mind of the recipient) and its manifestation in the text; it reflects not only "roundness" but also reduction. It activates the paradigms of disappearance versus appearance and absence versus presence. The central paradox is that while the character upon which the theme used to focus is decentered in postmodern narrative, the relation of subject to object is still the crucial concern of the text. The result is that the very disintegration of the character becomes thematic. The character decomposes,

disintegrates temporally into movement, i.e., the fluidity of being, and “spatially” into the coexistence and rivalry of mental capacities. Sukenick writes, “[m]aybe there aren’t real characters. That’s an important thing. Maybe people are much more fluid and amorphous than the realistic novel would have us believe [...] that modes of character are breaking down”, so that people become just a “focus of consciousness”, that their “sense of themselves shifts according to situations that they find themselves in”, which would “allow wider possibilities to arise in yourself” so that “you can be an infinite number of beings” (Bellamy 1974, 62-65). Sukenick (like many of his colleagues), in fact, reverses the traditional dominance relationships between character and situation. He writes: “I don’t really believe in characterization in the old sense. [...] In my fiction there is a heavier sense of the way situation can influence characterization in contemporary life [...] I also think the interior environment of the personality has become more fluid, more subject to immediate incident and circumstance than was true in the Victorian personality as portrayed in traditional fiction” (*In Form* 1985, 132-33). The unification of mental capacities is endlessly deferred, as is the unity of character. Rorty, in an earlier article defines the subject not as a “moral self, the embodiment of rationality, not as one of Rawls’s original choosers [...] but as a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it — no substrate behind the attributes. For purposes of moral and political deliberation and conversation, a person just *is* that network” (1983, 585-86).

In fact, *perception, reflection, emotion, desire, and action* are thematized in their own roles, for the most part independent of the unity of character. They can mediate between force and form because they are *processes*, not results, and do not serve, or participate in, a static “system” of power and values, and they still contain meaning, meaning in a fluid, indeterminate, intermediate state that encompasses the possible in the actual, the unknown in the known. They structure the field of experience or, rather, they are made to deconstruct the static and ideological fields of what is called “reality”, of belief and truth, and are themselves problematized in their functioning and their interrelation with one another, of course always with reference to a subject, which cannot be dispensed with, even if only a “voice” appears to speak and act the text. The potential

or non-potential that each mental approach has for making “meaning” flexible, for participating in the creation of values and building a meaningful attitude towards a world that includes the ineffable becomes an important thematic issue and shapes the situations of the narrative. This means that the character does not react to the world in full consciousness, with all his or her mental capacities. The relationship between character and world, subject and object, in Vattimo’s words, is never rendered in “fully unfolded luminosity” but in a “faint light”. Art is now a “weak ontology”, and truth in art is “stripped of the authoritarian traits of metaphysical evidence” (1988, 75, 85, 76). The decenterment of character leads to a decenterment of the narrated situation, which loses its focal point. This effect finally induces narrative to represent the story, the character, and the plot only in their unrepresentability, as that which cannot be grasped as unity and “reality”. Coover says that “[t]he trouble is, it’s usually a story that can never be told — there’s always this distance between the sign and the signified. [...] The important thing is to accept this unbridgeable distance and carry on with the crazy bridge-building just the same” (LeClair and McCaffery 72).

When the synthesizing instance of the theme is not the logical, causal, syntagmatic organization of character and plot but the field of experience, and within the field of experience the situation and the sequence of situations, then the theme reflects these circumstances by crystallizing in a *ground-situation*, which in postmodern fiction is the underlying basic situation of both fragmentation and fusion. It seems to fulfill itself in negation. Yet there is a paradoxical turn-about. In terms of deconstruction, the theme seems to resign itself to the limits of representation and cognition, but deconstruction is bound up with reconstruction, and the process of reconstruction turns around and — in contrast to modernism — presents its own thematic anti-theme, the positivization of the negative, the paradoxical ability of the imagination to shift the balance. This creativity does not emerge from the cognitive, rational, and emotional control of world and self but from the pause, or the blank; the result is the widening of the world beyond rationalization and control. The imagination and its themes of course are not placed in a vacuum; they have their frame of reference, which could be the essence of human existence and the self, or the relationship between the individual and society. As

mentioned, none of this could work in postmodern fiction under the paradigm of disappearance vs. appearance. In the case of postmodern writers, the themes of fluidity, multiplicity, and the ineffable find their focus, so it seems, in the energetics of *life*. Life's paradoxical fusion of being and becoming, of connection and separation, contrast and reversal, is the model for the fusion of form and force, even though in the individual case this link might not be mentioned. This preeminence of life as model for the texts not only affects the narrative strategies but, in the case of Elkin, also reverses the modern trend of defining character and theme primarily by existential depth and intensity of consciousness and awareness, and leads to a new appreciation of the "small satisfactions of life". The result is the paradoxical situation that, in his words, "[t]he theme of the novel [*The Dick Gibson Show*] is that the exceptional life — the only great life — is the trite life. It is something that I believe" (LeClair and McCaffery 117).

The representation of multiplicity and multi-valence as form, however, needs a variability of *perspectives*, perspective being the ultimate form because it evaluates the material and gives the theme its direction, its judgmental potency. The perspective again brings in the *human* stance as corrective to the viewpoint of universal, trans-human life. The decenterment of character and the decomposition of the situation are, as it were, "rectified" by simultaneity and exchangeability of perspectives that form the master code of the author. Their arrangement is *human* work, the creative work of the *imagination*, and therefore restabilizes the human perspective and reintroduces control. Play and (self-)irony, the parodic and the comic modes rule, loosen up and make flexible the presentation of the material; they "positivize" negativity (Warning) and prevent a shifting of the text towards chaos, but they also preclude its schematization under any single term, even such as disappearance or multiplicity, and the reign of a fixed ideological position, a circumstance that allows even the revival of character and plot, though in translated form. Play, irony, parody, and the comic mode extend the possibilities, including the possibilities of form; they provide the aesthetic distance that is necessary for the interface of form and force. These open modes in fact become thematic. They blend the representational (form) and non-representational (force), the ordered (form) and the chaotic (force); they also fuse the mimetic



(form) and the anti-mimetic (force), which in fact cannot be separated, as Heidegger noted. According to him, non-representational thought is balanced by its counter-pole, representation, and the latter cannot be eliminated by “a shift of attitude, since all attitudes, including the ways in which they shift, remain committed to the precincts of representational thinking” (1971, 87). Though the mimetic, of course, does not “adequately” represent reality or ground, which remain illegible, and though it consists only “of that simulation that Aristotle called *mimesis*” (Genette 1988, 18), it might be “time for postmodernity [and the criticism of postmodern narrative] to consider mimesis and anti-mimesis together, as intertwined parts of a puzzle that we shall possibly never solve” (Gibson 103), which arises out of the combination of form and force. In postmodern fiction, the *perspective*, not “truth”, reigns; the new truth is the truth of the variability of perspectives. The variability of perspectives and of truth, however, paradoxically, rests on *one* truth, the impossibility of filling or covering the void and the irreversibility of death. The ultimate theme then is representation not of world and self but of this paradoxical constellation of disorder and order, uncontrollability and control, in a continuous stream of irresolvable situations.

### 3.4. Situation, Symbol, and Meaning

The use of the symbol in postmodern fiction may here demonstrate how the various modalities of form, pattern and self-reflexivity, collage, rhythm, theme, and perspective in various combinations work together to create, play with, ironize, and parody forms of meaning. The reason for activating the symbolic mode of significance in postmodern fiction is the same as it was for romantic, “realistic”, and modern fiction: to fill gaps of knowledge that cannot be filled by rational explanation, with the difference, however, that now the gaps have widened to include the *void* (a crucial word in postmodern fiction), and that the ambivalent suggestions of symbolic meaning have increased in uncertainty to a point where meaning includes chaos and pure nonsense and where not the inherent meaning but the willful perspective reigns absolute. Just as the reconstruction of theme after its deconstruction demonstrates its irreplaceability as organizational matrix, so the reconstruction of the

symbol reveals the lack of substitutes. It gives force form and allows for uncertainty of both form and force. In its modification, the symbol is exemplary of the way postmodern narrative signifies.<sup>30</sup> The fact that it deconstructs and yet reconstructs the most important indirect signifying mode of modernist fiction, the symbolic signification, demonstrates that there is continuity in discontinuity.

The literary symbol is a unit of interpretative significance. It is a concrete part of, and embedded in, a narrated situation, which comprises the whole situation or a sequence of situations. It is based on the relations that emerge from the sensory surface-representation; it participates in the perspectival portrayal of the situation and is a mode of valuation. Or, to use linguistic terms, words assume the character of signifiers of a material world, and, their signifieds, corporeal entities, provide access, on another level, in a secondary interpretation, to a synthesizing meaning. In other words, the signifier of a literal signified (for instance a picture, a house, or a landscape) can also be a secondary signifier which refers to another (symbolic) referent, incorporated in the signified fictional thing,<sup>31</sup> and thereby implants in the concrete thing a judgmental, generalizing significance, which can be either more open and forceful, or more closed and form-oriented. Form in the symbol correlates with that which it is to control or fails to control — force.

The versatility of the literary symbol makes possible its use as a meaning-given device in quite different context. In a Romantic text of the nineteenth century, it tends to point from a part to the whole, to a depth dimension, the essence of nature or the world; in “realistic” fiction it mostly refers “horizontally”, in terms of contiguity, to a neighboring context (house mirrors the history of a family); in modern texts, it increasingly takes on a central formal and thematic role, the function of integrating the various aspects of the narrative, of “bundling” the components of its significance (Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*), and thus of serving the so-called “irony of form” — i.e., of mirroring the ambiguities of meaning and the manifoldness of perspectives in a “totalizing” form. It is obvious that from Romanticism to aesthetic Modernism the “natural”, obvious kind of referentiality of the symbol decreases, while the constructionist factor, the formal and thematic function, and the ambiguity of meaning increase to a point where the symbol stands for the ineffable (as it already does in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*). The

postmodern text heightens both the constructionist factor and the openness of the symbol, as we will see, and, as mentioned, subjects it to the play of perspectives. All this is possible because the literary symbol, like the narrated situation on which it builds its interpretative function, is a complex formal model of signification with quite variable elements. As such a model of meaning it has a number of basic properties: an abstract correlation of prerequisites and conditions, the general components of a structure, defined in relation to one another and in various combinations, constituting interrelations of causality, correspondence, interaction or conditioning. There are three basic components of the literary symbol: (1) The basis of the symbol is the narrated concrete entity, the *vehicle*. Not only is the kind of object presented significant for the function of the symbol but also the way of its representation, either as a detailed image or only a shortened and skelleted diagram. It is evident that the more detailed the image-situation presents itself, the more complex and open can be its meaning, while the diagrammatic representation is more explicit and tends more towards closure. (2) The semantic *tenor* or meaning of the symbol can be more definite or more indefinite, though in fiction it generally retains at least a residual mystery because of the length of the text and the manifoldness and complexity of relations. The tenor may be innovative (and private) or conventional, or both. The manifestation of the symbolic significance may be more self-evident or more dependent on the context; the referential scope of the tenor may be wide or narrow. In all cases, the author and the reader have to depend on a functioning relationship between the (inherited, acquired) code and the rendered information for the decoding of symbolic meaning. (3) The specific *relation* between vehicle and tenor determines the way the symbol signifies, for instance in terms of causality or analogy. This aspect of the symbolic structure is versatile and difficult to define. It can be more rational and direct, though not exclusively so, can be what traditionally has been called “*allegorical*”, in Goethe’s words, “searching the concrete for the general”, “where the specific serves only as example, an exemplification of the general”. The vehicle here has no significant existence and value of its own as a concrete entity since the value is extrinsic (though in the novel, through the process of time, the “*allegorical*” meaning is always complicated). Or the value signified

is intrinsic to the vehicle, and its apprehension by the recipient intuitive; this is a method of signification which, again according to Goethe, “is the true nature of poetry; it renders something concrete, without thinking of the abstract or pointing to it” (327). Of course, Goethe’s position is time-bound and has to be expanded in order to account for modern and postmodern developments (cf. Kafka, or Barth), but it differentiates quite clearly and saliently two positions on a scale that allows for many transitions and mixtures. All three components of the literary symbol unite as *aspects* of the concrete symbolic configuration and can be interpreted in different modal manners (determined seriousness, play, irony, parody, the comic mode).

Symbolization acts as a means for making up for a deficit of meaning. It is an assimilative activity. The capacity of symbolic meaning arises out of the incapacity of explaining and representing the absent, the ungraspable, but unavoidable, which become only accessible indirectly, if at all, by the suggestions of symbolic thinking. The effect of the complication of symbolic experience, of the definition of its preconditions and of its relevance as strategy of creating meaning, is complexity. This brings about a paradoxical state of affairs with contrasting and mutually exclusive positions. First, symbols, or rather, the tradition of symbolic thinking (i.e., the use of images that interpret the world as meaningful) is considered under postmodern conditions to be *falsifying* reality, i.e., raising artificial barriers to keep the world at a distance, and thus to reify interpretations into repressive systems (cf. Kristeva’s contrasting of mobile, semiotic articulation and symbolic disposition, encouraged by capitalist society;<sup>32</sup> or Lacan’s and Deleuze’s distrust of society’s symbolic patterning activity). Second, signs and symbols both as things and language, however, appear to be so much part of our world and our literature — in our TV-society they seem to obliterate reality in favor of the constructions of the mind — that one cannot disregard them, can, at the most, denounce them as clichés. Third, on a basic psychological level, signs and symbols have an irreplaceable pragmatic and psychic function. They help to reduce the unmanageable and unbearable complexity of the world, to make it translatable into social and personal functions, to give the contingent order. Symbolic thinking combines with rational thought in organizing the world. (This is why Lacan, Kristeva, and Deleuze,

though in varying degrees, both distrust and acknowledge the necessity of such a symbolic signifying practice.) Fourth, as the result of the signifying interrelation of images and sensory constructs with characters, actions, and themes, the singular is permeated by meaning beyond itself; the single occurrence or entity becomes representative in and for a web of relations. In Kenneth Burke's words, "[one] cannot long discuss imagery, [...] without sliding into symbolism [...] We shift from the image of an object to its symbolism as soon as we consider it, not in itself alone, but as a function in a texture of relationships" (281-82).

The conflicting approaches towards the different aspects of the symbol cannot but make the role of the symbol itself complex. Just as rational thought develops into the "dialectic of the enlightenment" (Adorno and Horkheimer) — i.e., the double function of rationalization of creating order and repression — so symbolic thinking develops what Habermas in an essay calls the "dialectic nature of symbolization" (1997) — the *innovation* and the *reification* of meaning by the symbol. A philosophical writer of fiction, William Gass, refers to this very dialectic when he says in an interview:

The division that is commonly made between life on the one hand and literature on the other isn't tenable. Certainly literature and the language it contains is a quite different thing from things; but experience, even the most ordinary kind, contains so much symbolic content, so much language. For a great many of us in our society, now, a great part of what we encounter every day is made of symbols. We are overrun with signs. Some would say that the experience provided by a book is somehow artificial, not as profound or important as some other experiences. But I think the testimony of everybody who is interested in literature — or painting or film or what have you — science — is that this is not the case. Our experience of signs can often be the most profound and important of our life. In a way the point of getting control over the things of the world, non-symbolic nature, if you like, is to begin to surround yourself with the things which man is most interested in, and those are symbols. In the broadest way, one's aim in existence is to transform everything into symbols — and many of these will be signs, as in literature (LeClair and McCaffery 169-70).

Though "[t]he desire to understand the world is [...] ridiculous", the intellectual and emotional needs that seek to complete the incomplete cannot be negated. This is true of writer and reader alike, whatever the form and the force of the stories may be,

since postmodern fictions also claim to be “valuable fictions of humanity, without the ‘assumption’ of which human thought, feeling and action must wither” (Vaihinger 171, xx). Following this line of argument, Nelson Goodman adds to the questions, “What are worlds made of? How are they made?” another pair, “What role do symbols play in the making? And how is Worldmaking related to knowing?” (1978, 1) On the one hand, “the psyche works over the material presented to it by the sensations [...] with the help of logical forms”, while on the other hand, “the sensations produce within the psyche itself [...] subjective processes” (Vaihinger 171) of interpretation and symbolization. The latter are guided by relations and interrelations that emerge within the situation and the sequence of situations and give gestalt to the relation between vehicle and tenor. The signifying processes move between the poles of image and meaning, situation and reflection, experience and explanation, but reach beyond explanation and definition. They attain their postmodern gestalt by rendering the relation between vehicle and tenor instable and indistinct, in the sense that what the tenor points to is not the actualized meaning but only the *possible* significance within the actual, which then, however, *is* the actual. According to Cassirer (who includes concepts in his argument [1953-57, 19, 21-22, 39-40]), the resulting symbolic configurations are, in Iser’s words, “traces of the nongiven in the given that would remain inaccessible to comprehension without such interpolated schemata” (1993, 141).

To become more concrete at this point and to document with textual examples what has been said about form and force and their interaction, we will analyze five passages that also exemplify the tendency of postmodern fiction to fabricate symbols or symbolic constellations for the representation of the unknowable, uncontrollable and unrepresentable. They demonstrate the interrelation between form and force, the actual and the possible, absence and presence as well as the thematic and perspectival constellations in the meaning-building process, either with regard to the vehicle or the tenor, or both, or to the (more or less distinct) relation between vehicle and tenor. These texts illustrate the range of the symbol, from a type that quite generally suggests the complexities of life, to a type that signifies the problematics that confront an individual subject in its relationship with the world and its uncertainties, to yet another kind that answers to poetological

questions and parodies (modern) symbolic concepts of totality. They are all thematically relevant and are determined by the choice and the clash of perspective(s). In Barth's *The Floating Opera*, there is a boat that is depicted in terms of both the involvement in and detachment from time, as a wide-open deck with a play going on forever:

The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors, or hear the word passed along from upriver or downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't [...] I needn't explain that that's how much of life works (7).

The symbol is here constructed in typically modern terms as a "thematic" symbol, which is, announced right in the title of the novel (as it is in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*). The boat is the central symbol that combines stability and movement, the representation of both the lifeworld and the fictitious world, that integrates the perspectives of the auctorial, all-knowing narrator and the knowledge that Andrew Todd, the protagonist, is going to attain; the boat connects the distancing, ironic tone and perspective of the narrator with the seriousness of an almost allegorical, all-comprising view of life, and with a sympathetic view of the fate of the protagonist which results directly from his attempts to create meaning. Building boats is Todd's hobby and represents his vain attempt to construct worlds of his own. Being subjected to the impersonal interpretation of life as unavoidable destiny, represented by the riverboat and its "floating opera", a theater show, it is only logical that the frustrated Todd (the name alluding to the German word Tod, meaning death), in a futile suicide attempt (as a last means to vanquish life) at the end, wants to blow himself up, together with the floating opera, which is a thematic symbol of life as a mixture of "curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction, and entertainment" (FO 7). The fact that boat and show survive makes clear that, here and in almost all of Barth's novels and in postmodernism in general, life in its diversity serves as the last instance of integration. Life — in an ironic reversal — is guaranteed by the work of art, a circumstance

that foreshadows the conception of the world as language: the floating opera “floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose” (*FO* 7). Both kinds of boats, those that represent dreams and those that depict the “world”, are fictions.

It is typical of Barth that the symbolic vehicle is not a ship but a boat, that the sea is a river and that the boat does not move to reach a goal but “drifts” (a postmodern keyword) aimlessly “up and down the river”, not however on its own volition, but “on the tide”. The boat-symbol, complemented with the show-symbol, is not seen from the middle of life’s turmoil but from the distancing viewpoint of the (postmodern) onlooker. The tenor of the symbol suggests gaps of understanding and accentuates the role of the imagination in filling them. The narrator keeps his distance also from the onlookers and employs his remove for a postmodern playful, slightly ironic attitude that emphasizes possibility rather than the actuality of the given. The relation between vehicle and tenor is unequivocal; it indicates a one-to-one relation between life and boat-show (“I needn’t explain that that’s how much of life works” [*FO* 7]), while, however, the tenor that is life, is diffused in its meanings, actually signifies only gaps, misunderstandings and the human failure to grasp life, even though life is right in front of everybody’s eyes, and one has to live through it. The form factor is embedded in the vehicle, the boat seen from a distance (detachment being an important characteristic of the postmodern writer) and in the universalistic, quasi-modern tenor (the law of life) and the relation between the two (boat and opera representing life). Yet the (postmodern) force component turns the actual into the possible and the known into the unknown and existential seriousness into playful suggestiveness.

In Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, the description of a painting provides a triple-directed meaning, a universal reference to life, an indication of the existential situation of the viewer, and also a poetological statement about postmodern fiction, namely the necessity of what Federman calls “filling a space (the pages), in those spaces where there is nothing to write” (1975, 12) — spaces, however, where one *has to* write, though there is nothing to write, in order to fill the void (another keyword of postmodern fiction). The following passage refers to an incident in Mexico City in the distant past. Together with her former lover, Pierce Inverary, Oedipa Maas,



the heroine of the book, “somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varos”:

In the central painting of a triptych, titled “Bordando el Manto Terrestre”, were a number of frail girls with heartshaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a *void*, seeking hopelessly to *fill the void*: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and *the tapestry was the world*. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried. No one had noticed; [...] She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from *nothing*, there’d been *no* escape. What did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only *incidental*: that what really keeps her where she is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her *from outside* and *for no reason* at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (*CoL* 10, my italics)

The vehicles of the symbolic configuration, “the top-room of a circular tower”, the “frail girls”, “the tapestry which spilled out the slit windows”, point to the oppositions of enclosure-openness, actuality-possibility, something-nothing; the tenor interprets the antitheses of the basic situation in dynamic terms as void, and the striving to fill the void and its failure, as prison and the futile attempt at escape, as the (accidental or intentional) workings of anonymous and malignant powers and the failure to understand them. There is something to fear and nothing to do. This paradigm of outside power or emptiness versus personal presence and helplessness suggests a depleted configuration of the absurd and emphasizes aspects of life like uncontrollability, unknowability — in short, the ineffable in a complex chain of references. The relation between vehicle and tenor is subjective: it personalizes and existentializes meaning; it negates possibility and hope by emphasizing the both enclosing and empty actuality.

The gist of what Oedipa feels and thinks, and in fact also the fusion of feeling and thinking in her response, are “thematic” in the sense that they point forward to the kind of experience she will face and the way she will react to it during her attempt to make sense out of her task as executress of Pierce’s will after his death and the failure of her venture, with all the consequences that the book is to develop in regard to character and plot. But the painting is more than a private symbol. Oedipa’s reaction is representative of the more general desire to leave behind the actual societal prison or closure for the openness of possibility in spite of the danger of nothingness that one might confront as a result. The painting and its interpretation furthermore indicate the difficulty, if not impossibility, of representing the experience of facing the void and trying to fill it, and the failure in the attempt of representation (“embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into the void, seeking too hopelessly to fill the void”). Finally, the sum of the painting’s meaning, on an abstract level, is the struggle between actuality and possibility, possibility and impossibility. The experience of *impossibility*, which is unrepresentable, is cast at the end of the quoted passage in terms of playfully incongruous *possibilities* that all would be futile and lead to nothing, leaving Oedipa in the state of not-knowing and indecision. The *force* factor here informs the circumscribable content of the vehicle, the painting, as *desire* to escape prison and to understand the world and the self. As a formal corollary of the undecidable and the non-understandable, the symbol invents the tenor with a multi-perspective, an ever-widening, multivalent meaning that branches out into private existence, universal void, and the problem of representation.

In the first two examples the symbol has a synecdochal structure, the part referring to the whole, while the postmodern metaphorical, i.e., constructionist, structure of these symbols announces itself in the multiplicity of levels of meaning and the role of reflection that characterize the tenor (Oedipa), in our third example from Barthelme’s novel *The Dead Father*, the author reduces the psychological factor of experience and increases the play factor, while in the process both constructing and deconstructing the symbol. He plays gleefully with all totalizing concepts, those of metaphysics, social relations, individuality, and aesthetics (of modernism), by making the Dead Father the overstrained symbolic

vehicle of almost all possible meanings. This produces a relationship between vehicle and tenor that is ludicrous, but that nevertheless indicates the serious dialectic of dead and alive, father and son, modernism and postmodernism:

Now he expands his emblem of the word — the Dead Father — and has it include any particularized belief system (honor, law, truth, tradition, art) and any human experience (the parent) which creates and structures one's reality. The Dead Father hence has the function of God, or any value made absolute, which defines, governs, and then limits. [...] He is the father, the authority, in every structure context — anthropological, literary, psychological, philosophical, mythic, and so on. He is the archetypal father, the force of history, time, and experience, from which every child struggles in his weaning toward authenticity, originality and identity (*DF* 162-163).

Here both the vehicle, the Dead Father, whose shape is gigantic and indistinct, *and* the tenor, which dissolves into serial additions of incongruous roles, lose their circumscribability. The Dead Father is indefinable in terms of body, soul, or spirit, except that he represents authority, and the tenor is informed by the ridiculous attempt at totality by mechanical accumulation of aspects and roles. One function is joined to the next, not in the endeavor to make sense by integrating the single items into a whole but to ironize and reject totalizing (modernist) meaning-building processes. The form is exploded by the force factor, which here lies in the energetic *perspectives* of evaluation, play, irony, parody and the comic mode, which, however, as almost always in postmodern fiction, play around death and the void and try to fill the gaps of life and fiction by figurations of the imagination. What is deconstructed in a combination of image and explanation (which do not support each other but render their relation contingent) is the creation of an all-encompassing synthesis of authority, and of what one might call — in analogy to Frank Kermode's "concord fiction" — an (ironized) "concord symbol". If such concord symbols are used in postmodern fiction, they are comicalized, as in this case, by the incongruous relationship between vehicle and tenor and the ridiculously exaggerated range of meaning that flips over into meaninglessness in a "tilting game" (Iser) of "coherent deformation" (Merleau-Ponty, qtd. in Iser 1993, 231).

In our fourth example, life and art are conceived by Barth in contrasting terms as spiral (in other examples as Moebius strip, or labyrinth, etc.) and as circle. In the “Dunyazadiad”, from *Chimera*, Barth evokes the image of the logarithmic spiral and contrasts it to the circle in order to set two possibilities of confronting existence and imaginative creativity, a positive and a negative one, against one another. The opposition serves both to explain and dramatize the unexplainable and uncontrollable in both life and imagination. It correlates character, life, and art in a way that is typical of Barth, and not only of him. The Genie explains his project to Scheherezade and Dunyazade:

‘My project,’ he told us, ‘is to learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I’ve been — where we’ve *all* been. There’s a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes — perhaps I invented him — that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail’s pace has become my pace — but I’m going in circles, following my own trail! I’ve quit reading and writing; I’ve lost track of who I am; my name’s just a jumble of letters; so’s the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I’ve lost the key to’ (*Ch 18*).

The snail is not, like the boat in *The Floating Opera*, a suggestive synecdochal bearer of meaning as a suggestive part in a universal whole, a significant theater stage for the play of life. The vehicle here is much more complex in form and status. To begin with the status, it is both actual and fictitious (“I perhaps invented him”). The form of the snail grows and changes until its own properties like slowness, patience, instinctual rightness in collecting its materials and finding its way, are concentrated and abstracted into the figure of the spiral, the abstract and concrete spatial figuration of replenishment which Barth employs in many of his texts as image of the negentropic function of storytelling.

The vehicle is thus layered in itself. The tenor emerges out of both the dynamics of the vehicle, of movement and growth, and the different strata of knowledge and creativity, but it signifies only in relation to the Genie, his creativity as story-teller and his actual entropic situation. The snail and the spiral (set against the circle) represent an alternative possibility of life and creativity that is out of

reach for the Genie, or so it seems. His circling, in contrast to the spiraling of the snail, does not suggest replenishment but only “empty spaces”, the return of the same, disorientation, and affliction. However, the circle can be seen in relation to the spiral, as its reduction, but perhaps also as the starting point for replenishment.

Possibility again balances actuality. The tenors of circle and spiral together signify both entropy and creativity and the conquest of entropy by the negentropic energies of storytelling. The Genie in another passage suggests his wish to return to the sources of storytelling. The form of the vehicle is here not “natural”, but constructionist and doubled (body/ motions of the snail and the spiral), just as the tenor is. The result is an all-encompassing symbol of the situation of the writer in Barth’s texts, for instance in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Barth himself says in an interview:

There’s a marine animal I’m fond of (I don’t think I invented him, though maybe I improved on him). He’s a crustacean who creates his spiral shell as he goes along. The materials he encounters are assimilated into it, and at the same time he more or less intuitively directs his path toward the kinds of material shells are best made of. How I love that animal! He’s the perfect image for me. He moves at a snail’s pace (and I do, too). He wears his history on his back all the time, but it’s not just a burden; he’s living in it [...] (now I know I’m making him up) (Gado 129).

One last example of the postmodern use of the symbol comes from another highly symbolic work, Gass’s *The Tunnel*. The protagonist, William Frederick Kohler, a history professor who has written a book about *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany*, reflects about the death of Magus Tabor, who had taught him, “don’t deal with the unnamed, they are without signification; remember, to be is to be enunciated — said, sung, shouted — to be syllabated” (*Tun* 277). Only naming means signifying. Tabor said:

I was a word, therefore I was; and while I was a word, brief as a breath, held in the head or sustained on paper, prolonged in print, bound as a book, I was like licketty, you understand, like a term on one of the tablets of the gods, like lights made of stars flicked on and off to say: here I am, I’m stage, I’m song, I’m printed on the ticket; so Tabor could die in a thousand descriptions, although each way only once: once as a disturbance, once as a sign from the gods, once as a penalty, once to signify the unfairness of fundamental things, once to be symbolic of his soul’s strife, once to remind me of what he taught, once to be simply

another number in the census of the dead that day, the day — evening, midnight, dawn — he did it — it did it — died (*Tun* 277).

The vehicle, the character as symbol, Magus Tabor, is, or rather, was, actual and remains a constant in the game of accumulating reference. But the tenor multiplies, and the relation between vehicle and tenor becomes indistinct, to say the least. Form is overcome by force, stability by movement, and dissemination of meaning. Significance is the plurality of possibilities; they fill “one’s arena of empty awareness” and disentangle the “thicket of concealment” (*Tun* 312). Life and death span the widest range of possibilities; they include the essential as well as the trivial. That possibility in the novel is force and energy, is underlined by the fact that the book, in addition to passages like this, continually symbolizes the plurality of possibilities. It does so by a wide variety of different types of print and spatial arrangements of the text on the page, by an interaction of prose and poetry, high style and low style, and references to almost a hundred other writers, philosophers and scientists and their versions of truth. They mirror further, comparable possibilities, thus establishing a network of intertextual references that symbolize the infinity of possible enunciations of what life, death and art are.

As has become evident, the crucial factor in symbolic thinking in postmodern fiction is not the vehicle or the tenor but the *relation* between the two, or rather, the *process of relationing* in general, which is both independent of and dependent on symbolic meaning. In the extreme case, as Lyotard notes, “to link is necessary; how to link is contingent” (1988, 29). Beckett, arguing both from modernist and postmodernist positions, speaks to the point:

[V]an Velde is [...] the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion [...] I know that all that is required now [...] is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation (Beckett and Duthuit 21).

After Beckett, the act of finding “a new term of relation”, and one might add, relation between deconstructive/reconstructive force and the forms of control, is the constant task and failure of the

artist; and both the task and the failure call forth and limit the symbol-building process, whose vertical structure of form is replaced by an additive, “horizontal” one of desire and force that, dissolving static form, looks for new, dynamic form. Force builds up its own symbolic potential, but it does so — in C. G. Ogden’s words, from a discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s theory of fiction — under an “ingenious Logic of ‘incomplete symbols’” (cxlviii) — incomplete because, in the postmodern case, its tenor is diffused, *can* only be diffused, is even obscured by narrative complexity. This complexity is again symbolic in its artistic status. According to Barth, it “turns the artist’s mode or form into a metaphor [or symbol] for his concerns”. Barth strives for what he calls “the Principle of Metaphoric Means”, “*the investiture by the writer of as many elements and aspects of his fiction as possible with emblematic as well as dramatic value: not only the ‘form’ of the story, the narrative viewpoint, the tone, and such, but, where manageable, the particular genre, the mode and the medium, the very process of narration — even the fact of artifice itself*” (Ch 203, Barth’s italics). Here form is no longer representative of content, but mirrors the state of the artifice, its artificiality and self-reflexivity. But one can still discern the kinship with the modern totalizing symbol, the difference, however, being that the symbolizing vehicle is the total creative *process* of the text in all its aspects, and not a centered structure, a “spatial”, thematic constellation of meaning-giving simultaneity, and that the tenor does not point to (problems of) identity, awareness, or any kind of existential condition, but to the imagination, its creative task, and the result of its activity.

Since there are no longer “natural” or essentialist relations that point to pre-stabilized wholeness, vehicle and tenor of the symbol and the relation between the two are open to willful *construction*, which leads to the fantastification of the vehicle and, concomitantly, the expression of the tenor in mere fantastic terms of possibility. In other words, the relations between vehicle and tenor are made artificial; they are *aestheticized*. The mode of relating them to one another is no longer *synecdochal*, i.e., substantialist-relational (Platonic), setting the part for the whole, which is only possible as long as a substantial similarity between vehicle and tenor exists. Furthermore, it is not a *metonymic* symbol; the latter works in terms of contiguity, i.e., does not constitute “linked analogies” (Ahab) but

sets up a single phenomenon in itself without it acting as the substantial part of a whole, as the synecdochal symbol does. It makes use of the fact that meaning is established with the help of associations that connect contrastive relations in terms of contiguity, by evoking the “consciousness of a paradigm” (R. Barthes) in the reader, who calls up the pattern of opposites. Then it is possible that rain in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* refers to mishap and distress because in the consciousness of the reader it implies the opposite, sunshine and dryness, even though in the book the sun never shines, and so the other pole of the opposition thus is not established or emphasized.

The postmodern symbol is neither synecdochal nor metonymic; it is “*metaphorical*”<sup>33</sup> in the sense that it has a constructionist form that depends on aesthetic designs that do not grow out of but are *imposed* on the material. As quoted above, Sukenick, speaking of Federman’s *The Voice in the Closet*, says, “you simply impose a form on your materials, it not really mattering how this form was generated. Calvino does the same kind of thing” (LeClair and McCaffery 291); and Federman notes, interchanging the terms metaphor and symbol: “I still have to find the image, the metaphor which will sustain the novel. That too is crucial to my writing, or to much of so-called postmodern fiction: it relies strongly on a central metaphor [...] My role, once I have set up [or imposed] the metaphor, is to decipher the meaning of that metaphor and write its symbolic meaning [one might add: in terms of possibility]. That will be the novel” (LeClair and McCaffery 129). Finding and (consciously or unconsciously) imposing symbolic meaning are here the same thing. Elkin says: “I’m conscious of symbols and patterns in my work. But this is something I’ve sometimes come on to only after the fact and then made the most of” (LeClair and McCaffery 108). Gass notes: “I keep fussing around, trying to find ways to symbolize what I want. [...] A particular piece is likely to be the exploration of a symbol or a certain set of symbols, and this constrains the text. No meaning can go away without returning” (LeClair and McCaffery 162, 168). Federman has invented perhaps the most drastic of metaphorical symbols with a most rigidly and willfully imposed tenor: “For me, masturbation is simply a gesture which may carry symbolic or metaphorical possibilities. It’s in this sense that one must read the masturbation scene [in *Take It Or Leave It*] that follows the jam



session in the jazz scene. In other words, masturbation, whether performed singly or collectively, can be symbolic of heroic gestures, just as it can be an act of cowardice or escape” (LeClair and McCaffery 133). The metaphorical symbol relies on the creative act of the mind, on the imagination, which is able to constitute sense-making configurations in unlimited number and without restriction on whatever materials it chooses. As a result, the relation between sign and referent becomes variable, forced open to transformation; it is no longer clearly founded in, or limited by, a specific concrete entity, an organic vehicle that points to an organic wholeness. The fact that it is not the similarity in substance that counts, but only similarity in structure, in willfully imposed structure, opens up an infinite number of links between vehicle and tenor, makes the metaphorical symbol not only an important epistemological instrument in the processes of the mind but also the creator of ontological alternatives. It is a concentrated playing field, as it were, for form as pattern, as self-reflexivity, as collage, rhythm, theme, and perspective and thus informs about the formal aspects of postmodern fiction *in toto*.

In postmodern fiction the symbolic method is defined by the preconditions of situationalism (and the failure to overcome it), by possibility thinking, by the paradigms of appearance versus disappearance, presence versus absence, possibility versus actuality, a fact which leads to a willful imposition of meaning, which again leads to a tension between vehicle and tenor and a diffusion of meaning. One can interpret this development of the symbolic method as a weakening of the strong categories, not only of thought, but also of narrative signification. This weakness is the outcome of the failure to impose a figurating form of wholeness on the force of the situation. Nietzsche’s “perspectivism” has come to dominate the symbolic method, as, of course, it already did in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. However, in postmodern fiction it is no longer a psychological or epistemological perspectivism but an ontological one, dominated by the energetics of force. Force unfolds its power in creating fantastic worlds, in giving them form by freely distributing and adjusting all possible perspectives of evaluation, in superimposing one stance on the other and changing them at will, thus attaining its own form through possibility, simultaneity, and play, play being the only remaining synthesis, though in fact it is no synthesis.

Of course play has to have a substratum, and this is not independent of character. If the play with perspectives focuses directly on a character, it is no longer a substance in its own right but a kind of mirror for other people who make of it a metaphorical constructionist symbol, with a self-serving narrow and, by multiplication, wide-ranging tenor. In *Omensetter's Luck*, according to Gass, Omensetter's "unreflective, prelapsarian presence" acts like an undefined material to be used by other people for the needs and purposes of their own symbolic disposition, and "assumes fearful symbolic dimensions". He "strikes various people in town as a sort of reflector, precisely receptive to symbolizing because he appears not to do so. So each character in the novel is busy turning Omensetter into a kind of material for the symbols they wish to make" (Ziegler and Bigsby 153-54). The relation between vehicle and tenor here turns arbitrary and contingent. Indeed, "this unreflective, natural, threatening character is a symbol for the concrete moment when all reflection breaks down, when those who reflect on different levels of consciousness can no longer communicate. Does Omensetter represent the opacity of the relation between reality and the imagination?" (Ziegler and Bigsby 153).

The symbolic design in fact can now only function by taking on the form of the *as-if* and is thus a construct of both actuality and possibility. The result of the instability of symbolic meaning and the tension between vehicle and tenor is such that the created worlds appear not in "depth" but in surface representation, and that the method of combining signifying entities is ultimately arbitrary or serial in the sense that all causal and analogical symbolic meanings are relativized to such a degree that they become metaphorical, are situationalized and serialized. The only way to achieve wholeness via symbolism is to "transcend the artifice by insisting on it" (Barth), i.e., to make every situation transparent for its constructedness and the constructedness of the artifice. The wholeness achievable is then the determination of all signifying by language and all narrative by self-consciousness. Signification, as it were, goes out into the fictional world and in a circle or spiral returns back, signifying itself as artifact. According to Ambrose Mensch, the alter ego of the author in *LETTERS*, "the real treasure (and our story's resolution) may be the key itself: illumination, not solution, of the Scheme of Things" (768). The symbolic method of postmodern fiction makes quite clear

that its central dialectic is that which already characterized modernism, the striving for meaning and its failure, with the difference that the failure is fully translated into form and perspectivized in multifarious ways by play, irony, and the comic mode. The attempt at control by aesthetic design may be considered the inheritance from *modern* narrative; the knowledge and playful acceptance of the failure of control (because of the multiplication of relations, the situationalizing and serializing of composition) is the *postmodern* deconstructive and reconstructive ingredient of the symbol. We will come back to the symbolic mode in another context, that of “spatial form”.

## **4. Philosophy and Postmodern American Fiction: Patterns of Disjunction, Complementarity and Mutual Subversion**

Symbolic signification creates an indirect evaluation of the world; reflection is an explanatory activity that problematizes the world. Both are activities of consciousness and interrelate in the production of meaning or the rejection of meaning. In order to assess the activity of consciousness or, rather, the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic preconditions of thought in American postmodern fiction, we will change the perspective and proceed with a direct comparison between fiction and philosophy under a number of differentiating aspects. Postmodern narrative is indeed the most philosophical narrative in the history of the genre. Though philosophical and literary enterprises go about their common business in different orderings, they complete and complement, interfere with and deconstruct one another, establishing favorable and unfavorable relations. In the American postmodern novel, philosophical thought and scientific knowledge are openly cited or tacitly invoked, consciously infused into the character's motivations and reflections, or unconsciously articulated as significant information. In addition to direct influences, the parallel concerns between thinkers and writers, philosophical thought, and narrative practice are important. If, as Sartre holds, "[a] fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics" and the "critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former" (1966, 87), and if, in Umberto Eco's terms, "writing a novel is a cosmological matter" (1984a, 20), the primary question is: which are the most productive, perhaps even necessary philosophies, cosmologies and systems of belief that can form the framework of thought and feeling for postmodern American writers and their texts, and mold the constructions of fiction, which, according to Gass, "are persistently philosophical" (1970, 17). To put it another way, the question is, in Barth's words, "which [concepts] are in fact among the indispensable intellectual baggage of our narrative-historical moment" (*OwS* 101). Barth in fact speaks of the "poignant but playful 'postmodern' spin-offs from notable scientific or philosophical propositions: Zeno's

paradoxes, Schrödinger's wave-function equations, whatever"(OwS 149).

Though there are innumerable kinds of interactions in practice, the relationship between literature and philosophy in general terms might be said to be fourfold.<sup>34</sup> It is characterized by *antagonism*, by *compensation* and *complementarity*, by *de-differentiation* and *disjunction*, and by *mutual subversion*. The link between the two disciplines is of course closely bound up with the conceptual direction and the narrative pattern of the text, as well as with the evaluation of reflection. The systematic approach in the following sections serves six purposes at once. (1) The basic categories of interrelation chosen here reveal quite generally something about the relationship between philosophy and literature. (2) These categories are used to point out important philosophical positions and theoretical trends that have become crucial for postmodern writers. (3) In each case the categories interrelate specific theories and the response to them by the writers, either in utterances within their fictional texts or in their other statements. (4) They allow us to identify some important differences between modern and postmodern fiction. (5) They prepare the ground and initiate the discussion of notions like the "real", the abstract, the fantastic, the absurd, and meta-fiction, play, paradox, negation, and entropy, concepts that are central for the analysis of postmodern fiction. (6) The detailing of the positions of postmodern writers will serve as an introduction to their personally specific approaches to fiction.

#### 4.1. Antagonism

The relationship between philosophy and literature can follow an antagonistic pattern, which leads to the exclusion of the respective other. But the dislike need not be uttered openly. In William Gass's words: "To be so close in blood, so brotherly and like in body, can inspire a subtle hate; for their rivalry is sometimes less than open in its damage" (1970, 4). Either philosophy can exclude art from the truth-seeking strategies (Plato), and its allegedly complete rationality can look with suspicion at what has been called the "philosophical imaginary", which constitutes "the shameful face of philosophy" (LeDœuff *Philosophical Imaginary* 20); or, con-

versely, philosophy could devalue its own rationality in favor of literature and art (Nietzsche). In literature, the aesthetic of representation aiming at concreteness turns against the abstractness of thought as something alien to literature. Hegel paved the way for the separation of art from philosophy by his understanding of the former as sensory expression, for which reflection is something external. In modern literature, the emphasis on bodily consciousness, on subconscious levels of experience, and the narrative method of indirection were in many cases not conducive to the inclusion of rational thought, least of all the discussion of philosophical concepts. Hemingway marks the extreme of an anti-intellectual attitude that shields literature from intellectual endeavors of the abstract kind, particularly when he says "For a writer to put his own intellectual musings, which he might sell for a low price as essays, into the mouths of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but does not make literature" (*DiA* 191). The theory of narration mostly clung to the rejection of the "dictatorship of ideas". Terms like "epic interpretation" opened then a new approach to reflection in the novel by avoiding categorical separations and suggesting that "[d]ecisive is not the popular or subtle character of the argument but the degree to which it assimilates itself to the epic" (Meyer 18).

For another part of modern literature (as we will see later), and for postmodern fiction in general, the integration of philosophy and reflection into the novel is no problem. On the contrary, what has been called postmodern meta-fiction aims at the inclusion of various discourses, including philosophical ones. Still, in postmodern narrative most of the more systematic theories are excluded, rejected, or played with. Obviously all essentialistic, rationalistic, and totalizing philosophical notions are problematic for postmodern aesthetics, because they, as it were, one-sidedly impose form over force. Examples are Freud's psychoanalytic theories and the essentialistic notions of Existentialism (though, as will be shown later, they remained useful for a number of authors in defining their counter-positions or their nostalgia, their sense of loss). Here Freud may exemplify the postmodern rejection (or reconception) of what was conceived as modern thought and psychological theory. Though Freud initiated what Thomas Pynchon called "the new science of the

mind" (*V.* 383), and though his theories opened up a large area of uncertainty in the human psyche by separating the unconscious from the conscious and making the irrational at least as important in terms of force as the rational is in terms of form, his rationalizing model-building nevertheless made him an object of suspicion. Indeed, most of the postmodern novelists see their age as post-Freudian (and post-psychological) and turn against what they perceive as the rationalistic, universalistic, transhistorical, and transcultural nature of Freud's theory.

Still, more often than not, they use him as one of their reference points. Pynchon again refers to our time as "this Freudian period of history" (*V.* 382) and quite generally uses the concept of the unconscious as frame of reference for the obsession and paranoia of his characters. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), for instance, he playfully relates Oedipa Maas's paranoiac quest for the underground Tristero System of communication to Freud's Oedipal rebellion. His reservations towards Freud show more clearly in *V.* (1963). In order to articulate his contempt for psychoanalysis, Pynchon replaces the role of the psychoanalyst with a character by the name of Eigenvalue, a dentist: "Back around the turn of the century, psychoanalysis had usurped from the priesthood the role of the father-confessor. Now, it seemed, the analyst in his turn was about to be deposed by, of all people, the dentist" (*V.* 138). Beckett in his postmodern text *How It Is* creates an obscene parody of Freudian and Darwinian thought by connecting psychology with scatology and offensive, pornographic speech, thus trying, in his own words, to introduce "the mess" that "invades our experience of every moment" into the text, and "to find a form that accommodates the mess", which he sees as "the task of the artist now" (qtd. in Bair 523). In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Freud is referred to with mocking laughter: "Freud ... came borne in a pleasing Bostonbred voice from a tall girl. — Hahaha ... Freud my ass" (*Rec* 509). Barthelme, in the fourth part of his story "Brain Damage" from *City Life*, ironizes the by now allegedly clichéd Freudian interpretation of dreams ("phallic symbol", engulfed by the vaginal cliffs "that rush forward threateningly" [*CL* 137]); in *Snow White* he parodies Freudian thought and psychological methods in pseudo-learned digressions and a questionnaire; and in *The Dead Father* he uses the idea of Oedipal rebellion and Freud's and Lacan's "dead Father" (the internalization of authority as conscience) for the

patterning of his novel. Ishmael Reed in his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* derogatively refers to Freud and the Freudians directly or indirectly more than ten times, calling Freud “the later Atonist” (rationalist, categorizer), “a big fan of Moses, Cromwell and other militarists” (*MJ* 192), “who refined the rhetoric of the Church” (197), and called occultism in America “The Black Tide of the Mud” (238), and who in fact took care that “Exorcism becomes Psychoanalysis, Hex becomes Death Wish, Possession becomes Hysteria” (244). In Gass’s *The Tunnel*, the historian Kohler is in the habit of reflecting about himself with continuous reference to thinkers, writers, painters, etc.: “No. I’ll dismiss the past as brusquely as a dishonest servant [...] I have Bartlett’s Quotations. Do I consult that. Like a wonderful physician, will it prescribe for me? so many drops of Proust, a tincture of Old Testament, daily dose of Freud, and I shall peel off my past like a sticker warning FRAGILE” (*Tun* 55). And then there is Nabokov, whose aversion to Freud could scarcely be expressed more succinctly: “an Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella” (*RL* 116).

Sukenick turns against psychology in general because “there are epistemological [and one might add, ontological] reasons before there are psychological reasons” (Bellamy 1974, 74). Appearing in person as a writer in his novel *98.6*, he calls “psychology [...] the trademark of a previous era”, sets “psychosynthesis” in the place of the rationality of psychoanalysis, and creates his companions in the book not as “psychological creatures” but (in terms of the philosophy of Life) as “creatures of biology and chance” (122-23). Barthelme follows suit. He answers a question about depth: “If you mean doing psychological studies of some kind, no, I’m not so interested. ‘Going beneath the surface’ has all sorts of positive-sounding associations, as if you were a Cousteau of the heart. I’m not sure there’s not just as much to be seen if you remain a student of the surface” (LeClair and McCaffery 43).

## 4.2. Compensation and Complementarity

In the literary text, the complementarity between art and philosophy serves the interrelation between narration and reflection. It takes the form of a balancing act between the concrete and the abstract, description and reflection, emotion and thought. Early on



Friedrich Schlegel said: "Philosophy and poetry are to be united"; "novels are the Socratic dialogues of our time" (200, 186). Considering the historical moment, Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* pleads for the inclusion of reflection in the novel. Furthermore, the narrative figure's act of reflection is the expression of its subjectivity, its "reflexive relation" to disparate reality; the narrator's act of reflection serves as correction to the subjective perspective and is the expression of a "normative objectivity" (74). It is not accidental that Herman Meyer developed his concept of "epic integration" while analyzing Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, an eminently reflexive and philosophical novel. The German reflexive novel of Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch (*The Sleep Walkers*) and Robert Musil (*The Man Without Properties*), but also André Gide's intellectual novels, especially *The Counterfeiters*, and Aldous Huxley's novels of ideas, for instance *Point Counter Point*, includes a great quantity of reflection, of philosophical and scientific thought. They respond not only to the new thinking in terms of wholeness that emerged from modern concepts of art but also directly to the epistemological and ethical problematics of the time and the uncertain situation of the subject in the wake of the findings of the natural sciences, of logic, and psychology since the end of the nineteenth century. Hermann Broch demands the inclusion of "the spirit of the epoch and its scientific character" and denounces the "solely narrative as deception of the intellect". The task of *The Sleepwalkers* was to show in the "field of tension between representation and reflection that which the purely scientific article cannot express" (qtd. in Steinecke 55, 72, my transl.). The late modernist Saul Bellow writes: "There is nothing left for us novelists to do but to think. For unless we make a clearer estimate of our condition, we will [...] fail in our function" (20).

The complementarity between modern science, philosophy, and literature reaches in its basic trends far into postmodernism. A number of names are here useful for their suggestive power, though, of course, distinctions have to be made with regard to the influence of those theorists either on modernism, or on both modernism and postmodernism, or specifically on postmodern writers. It is easy to see that the revolutionary discoveries in the natural sciences are fundamental for both modernism and postmodernism, that the existentialist philosophers step into the foreground with the

modernists but are marginalized in postmodernism, just like Freud's psychoanalytical system. Nietzsche on the other hand holds sway over both modernism and postmodernism, which however discuss quite different traits in his ambiguous notions (see Koelb). Language theory, finally, cannot develop its full influence in modern literature because the latter's belief in the mimetic and expressive power of language (and art) is generally unbroken. Relativity, indeterminacy, multi-perspectivity influence especially the concept of language in the postmodern novel.

What is attractive in the theories of science for the postmodern author are the theorems of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and discontinuity, and the view that all scientific theories are only fictitious models of reality. Einstein's theory of relativity challenges the Newtonian theory of gravity, while Planck's quantum physics paves the way for a logic of discontinuity. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states the impossibility of determining simultaneously both the position and velocity of a nuclear particle without falling prey to indeterminacy in one way or the other. Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity considers not just one but two contradictory theories as true (by defining light as both particles and waves), and Gödel's theorem of incompleteness maintains that illogic is part of any system's logic. They all substitute a state of indeterminacy, mere possibility, even randomness for the traditional classical certainty in physics. Sukenick, representative for many of his colleagues in his references to science, in his novel *98.6* raises the question "particles or waves", refers to the "principle of uncertainty", sees discontinuity in "the principle of probability" (169), speaks of "Schrodinger's wave equation" (184) and of "quantum mechanics" (170). These cross-references allow him to ponder about "life's energy", the indeterminacy and unpredictability of life, the problem of "attuning to the cosmos", the ideal union and connection that waves represent, and, most importantly, about the imagination through which one perceives "the improbabilities of the unknown" (*98.6* 170). In the same novel, Albert Einstein appears in a conversation with Golda Meir, as reported by her to the author Sukenick who is also a person in the book; just like Sukenick, Einstein chooses experience over theory, because "[e]xperience alone can decide on truth" (186).

Barth, well-versed in theory, turns to the epistemology of observation: In the title-story of *Lost in the Funhouse*, Ambrose "lost

*himself in the reflection* that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible” (90). Barth, who likes metaphors like the Möbius strip or the echo for the description of his concepts and strategies of narrative, like Sukenick refers to “Schrödinger’s quantum-mechanical wave-function equations” (and to “Einstein’s relativity theories [...] and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle”), and makes the wave the central figuration defining life and story. In his collection *On with the Story*, one of the stories is called “‘Waves,’ by Amien Richard”. It is a “waves-or-particles story”, with the waves clearly winning out as an image of everything that is alive, including the imagination and the story: “Waves everywhere, [...] Our bodies are waves [...] their particular constituents ever in flux”. Our selves are “[w]aves, definitely: mere ever-changing configurations of memories and characteristics embodied in those other waves, our minds and bodies. [...] indeed, all human relationships are waves [...] both our life stories and [...] our made-up [...] stories: waves waves waves, propagated from mind to mind and heart to heart through the medium of language via these particles called words”. And while adding the wave image the notion of multiplicity, while demonstrating that, in analogy to our lives, there are in narrative plural “[l]ife-stories. Life-or-death stories. Stories-within-stories stories”, Barth refers to “the ‘multiverse’ [instead of a “particular universe”] reading of quantum mechanics” (*OwS* 101, 107, 143, 181, 251).

Pynchon, to give another example, makes use of scientific and science-related notions like entropy, relativity, gravity, technological control, in order to gain multiple vantage points for his stories. He employs references to scientific epistemology, to Gödel and Heisenberg. *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), of which it has been said that things are more important than people and ideas more important than things (cf. Simmon),<sup>35</sup> makes the Rocket’s “terrible passage” into an “elegant blend of philosophy and hardware” (239), and refers, in the incessant cross-references to ideas, to the emerging “new Uncertainty” after “categories have been blurred badly” (303). He mentions Gödel and Heisenberg directly. Gödel is used when an argument is in the danger of closure: “And yet, and yet: there is Murphy’s law to consider, that brash Irish proletarian restatement of Gödel’s Theorem — *when everything has been taken care of, when nothing can go wrong, or even surprise us ... something will*” (*GR*

275, Pynchon's ellipsis). When no definite explanation can be found, Heisenberg is the reference point: "We seem up against a dilemma built into Nature, much like the Heisenberg situation. There is nearly complete parallelism between analgesia and addiction" (*GR* 348). Connections are also made without giving names: "It appears we can't have one property without the other, any more than a particle physicist can specify position without suffering an uncertainty as to the particle's velocity" (*GR* 348). In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, the allusions to scientists like Einstein and Heisenberg and a number of philosophers (Democritus, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Zeno, Nietzsche, Vaihinger, etc.) are finally turned into irrelevant and incongruent pieces of conversation, exhibiting the narrator's spirit of parody and satire. Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty comes to be illustrated in a film with "sand fleas" as "metaphor for the theoretical and the real situation" (*Rec* 640).

As is well-known and need only be mentioned here, the concept of entropy, the theory laid down in the second law of thermodynamics, is all-important for Barth, Pynchon, and their colleagues. The concept of entropy, the belief that the energies in a closed system (and the world as a closed system) are being exhausted, that differences are being blurred as enough energy is no longer available for "work", and that mere randomness is the true nature of what seemed an orderly system — all this provides literature and the arts with the "scientific" reason for the loss of metaphysical meaning and the decline of culture. Henry Adams was a precursor of this view of universal and cultural entropy. Pynchon picked up the thread and made it one of the central ideas of his work. He in fact writes a programmatic short story "Entropy"; in *Gravity's Rainbow* the "several entropies" (302) — in physics, communication theory and culture — are philosophic underpinnings of his work. Vonnegut employs the notion of entropy in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) in order to characterize the ending of the world as the result of technological progress; and Barth applies it to the exhaustion of literary forms (1984). Barth would not be the philosophical author that he is if he did not formulate the concept of entropy directly as "frame", as part of self-reflection in his fiction. A key phrase in the "Posttape" to *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) reads: "Late or soon, we lose. Sudden or slow, we lose. [...] There is an entropy to time, a tax on change" (707). Yet though the world may be a closed system and

subject to entropy, art is for Barth a counter influence, an open system where absorption and delivery of energy operate in a circulating process of exhaustion and replenishment: "Entropy may be where it's all headed [i.e., death], but it isn't where it [dramaturgy] is; dramaturgy [i.e., narrative, story, plot ...] is negentropic" (*Let* 768). Norbert Wiener, in his book *The Human Use of Human Beings*, applies the law of entropy to the theory of information, claiming that it is possible to treat sets of messages as entropic-like sets of states of the external world. His book, laying down the foundations of cybernetics, became, in Tony Tanner's words, "something of a modern American classic and may well have been read by many of the [contemporary] writers" (1971, 144). It is therefore no surprise that in Gaddis's *JR* the writer, Jack Gibbs in his frustration about disorder and waste cries out: "[R]ead Wiener on communication, more complicated the message more God damned chance for errors" (403).

Hassan is right in calling Nietzsche the "key to any reflection on postmodern discourse" (1987, 444). Yet, Nietzsche, the "philosopher of flow" (Gass 1996, 132), is a special case in that there are at least two Nietzsches, one considered paradigmatically modern, the other a prefiguration of postmodernism. And yet, though his influence on postmodern ideas — directly and indirectly — is overwhelming, his foundational importance is not or only uneasily and obliquely acknowledged in the ongoing discussion of postmodernism (see Babich). Nietzsche initiated the attack on the bourgeois humanistic tradition and was the mentor of the radical process of decentering thought; he was first and foremost in laying the groundwork for the deconstructive tendencies of both philosophy (Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida) and literature in the twentieth century. He challenged Western rationality, its dualistic foundations, its belief in the possibility of universal and univocal truth; he prepared the "new way to a 'Yes,'" and set up the field of force for the postmodern "free play" (Derrida) in the void of absence. For him, "the 'subject' is only a fiction", and reality constitutes itself not as "facts" but as "interpretations" (Nietzsche *Will* 1968, 199, 267). Indeed, knowledge should stop "courageously at the surface", and "adore appearance" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*; qtd. in Gass 1996, 134). It "has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. — 'Perspectivism.'" It is restricted by "the constraint of language"

(Nietzsche *Will* 1968, 267, 283). Federman follows suit and demands, as many postmodern writers do, that all forms of duality (since they rigorously impose form on force) should be negated — “especially duality: that double-headed monster which, for centuries now, has subjected us to a system of values, an ethical and aesthetical system based on the principles of good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly” (1975, 8).

Postmodern writers reject the binary mechanisms of exclusion as arrogant, even “terroristic”, and suspend the rigorous moral antitheses in an attempt to expand the force of experience and transform aesthetic form. It sounds a bit like Nietzsche (and, following him, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida) when in Pynchon’s *V.* it is said that “we do sell our souls: paying them away to history” for the doubtful advantage to attain form, to receive “the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of humanized history endowed with ‘reason’” (286). Though it is not necessary to assume a direct influence of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) on *Gravity’s Rainbow* (see Leont), it is obvious that Nietzsche’s rejection of traditional oppositions and cause-and-effect thinking in favor of the flow and forceful unity of life reappears in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, now turned into the opposition of two characters. The simplistic thought of the Pavlovian scientist Pointsman — who believes in the unlimited power of science, strives toward “mechanical explanation” for all phenomena, and holds that there is “[n]o effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages” (*GR* 89) — stands for the System, for the oppressive “Them”. Roger Mexico formulates the counter-position, namely the “‘feeling [...] that cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go [...] The next great breakthrough may come when we have the courage to junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle.’ ‘No — not ‘strike off’. Regress. [...] There are no ‘other angles’” (*GR* 89) — an attitude representative of the alternative belief in life, nature, and love. And it is not by chance that this Rationality-Life antithesis equates with the antithesis, in Foucault’s terms, of Power (the System, “They”) and resistance (Mexico, Slothrop). This is a vital opposition that turns static dualities into the narrative dynamics of the book.<sup>36</sup> Finally Nietzsche is also the reference for the multiplicity of languages and the problem of communication and the void. Federman cites Nietzsche as one of his mottos in *Take It or Leave It*:

“There are many more languages than one imagines. And man reveals himself much more often than he wishes. So many things that speak! But there are always so few listeners, so that man, so to speak, only chatters in a void when he engages in confessions. He wastes his truths just as the sun wastes its light. Isn’t it too bad that the void has no ears?”

Of course, Nietzsche was not the only one to challenge the cognitive ideal of universal truth and to propose the knowing activity of particularity, heterogeneity, and plurality of perspectives and values, as well as the process-nature of consciousness, and the constructedness and provisionality of the categories of thought. In less radical terms, yet still comparable to Nietzsche’s “perspectivism”, William James grounded his “pragmatism” in the pluralistic view “of a world of additive constitution” (1955, 112), and he coined the germane phrase “stream of consciousness” to designate the dynamics, the interminable flow, the continuum of the mind in contrast to the supposed fixities and results of its activities. Similarly, Husserl understood “being as consciousness”, as consciousness that operates intentionally, that not only relates to but constitutes the objects in our experience. Heidegger rejected, just as Nietzsche did before him, both “Cartesian subject-centered consciousness-centered philosophy” (Palmer 1967, 74), as well as science and technology that function as the modern form of “metaphysics”. Motivated by what he considered two thousand years of decadence, beginning with metaphysical thought separating entities from Being, he went beyond traditional self-centered humanism in a post-subjectivist quest. The priority of the life force in Nietzsche is comparable, though not identical, to Heidegger’s “call of being”, which requires as response not the self-assertion of the “will-to power” but an attitude of receptivity (“Gelassenheit”) to the process of pre-articulated understanding which is the basic mode of existing prior to interpretation, which in turn is prior to the “derivative” mode of specific assertion. The later Heidegger in his lifelong quest for the meaning of Being focused his thought on language as “naming”, which “brings the thing to word and appearance for the first time” (1971, 56); language figurates in poetry — by transgressing the inauthentic “Gerede”, the meaningless speech of everyday existence — as the “house of being”, the site where being is evented.

Beyond the fact that Heidegger is probably the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century, his paradoxical *absence-presence, said-unsaid* figurations possessed, potentially at least, great suggestiveness for the later thinkers and experimental writers. (We remember the Heideggerian interpretation of post-modern art by Spanos and others in the Sixties). Since his ideas were part of the intellectual climate, were taken up and transformed by the poststructuralists, thus were transmitted in different ways, they could exercise their stimulating force even when no direct influence was evident. Heidegger's existentialist notions had their effect in spite of the fact that they have a "depth" dimension, the notion of Being, which is hidden and being disclosed at the same time in what is "there", the "Dasein". The absence-presence opposition, which is related or relatable to the force-form paradigm, leaves space for the "inexplicable and unfathomable" (Heidegger), the mystery of life, and could be interpreted in quite different and reductive, also non-Heideggerian and non-essentialistic, constructivist and language-centered ways. Though it has always been salient in philosophy and theology, the antithesis absence-presence (now radicalized to become an epistemological and ontological paradox), together with the force-form opposition, became the basic matrix for postmodern strategies of deconstruction and reconstruction, with or without a nostalgic longing for the old answers to the pressing questions of meaning. Beckett already offers many examples in *Waiting for Godot*, his "trilogy" *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, and his later works. Hamm in the *Endgame* reacts to the absence of values with the outburst: "Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!"(29) The absence-presence figuration is strengthened in its importance by the fact that it also marks the world-language problem. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the most important initiator of the language-oriented theories of the twentieth century (about whom more will be said later), radicalized the language-reality problem that Nietzsche and Saussure had earlier approached, by separating the image of reality from reality itself; he thus problematized the representational dimension of language, its semantic value, and relativized meaning. His defining the "real" as mere "image" or proposition, in what he later came to call "language games", again poses the absence-presence opposition.



Such ideas prepare the way — just like the relativity and indeterminacy concepts of the natural sciences — for the strengthening of the force factor at the cost of form, for resistance to conceptional meaning and to the rational categories of thought, and for the encouragement of movement in thinking and of the unthought within the thought and the regard for the language-orientation of thought. They initiate the acceptance or at least negotiation of indefiniteness and uncertainty, of plurality of viewpoints and modal logic, furthermore the belief in the inseparability of reality and fiction, in the creativity of possibility thinking (in the face of the void), and in the superiority of the mobility of possible worlds over the staticity of actual ones. Having accepted the constructedness, the “as-if” character of all mental concepts and images, postmodern writers gained a new freedom in relating to philosophic notions. They could now regard historical thought as a viable, vital and recontextualizable, though fictitious, frame of reference and use it for meta-fictional purposes. It appears that the whole history of philosophy, from Zeno, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle to the poststructuralists — just like the history of literature and art — had opened up into an infinite field of possibility thinking, of allusive intertextuality, which made it possible, even advantageous, to include references in one’s text (argumentatively, paradoxically, ironically) to the past.

Not only the paradoxical absence-presence figuration, but also the *paradox* quite generally resides at the base of postmodern deconstructive/ reconstructive thought and narrative strategy. Gass in *The Tunnel*, for instance, gives numbers to his paradoxes: “BEING. Holy word. Being cannot be recognized unless it succeeds in Seeming. So Georgias asserted. Yet Seeming itself, will be weak and ineffective unless it succeeds in Being. Paradox # 75” (75). This predilection for paradox in postmodern fiction leads the writers back to the famous paradoxes of the pre-Socratic thinkers, of Heraclitus, Zeno of Elea, and Eubulides of Milet. They adapt them to their own purposes (see Broich). Zeno’s famous paradox of motion, the eternal race between Achilles and the turtle, which Achilles can never win, serves to underline in Borges’s stories a new aesthetic method of deconstruction and reconstruction that destabilizes rational-logical thinking. Borges reverses the function of the Achilles/Tortoise paradox which in Zeno was to prove that there is no motion, that swift

Achilles, in Barth's words, "can never catch the tortoise, [...] for in whatever short time required to close half the hundred yards between them, the sluggish animal will have moved perhaps a few inches; and in the very short time required to halve that remaining distance, an inch or two et cetera — ad infinitum, inasmuch as finite distances, however small, can be halved forever" (Barth, *OwS* 26). While Zeno used the paradox to make a statement about the nature of being, Borges suggests through it a skepticism towards logic and rational understanding. Borges has not only written two articles about this paradox, but moreover refers to it directly in three stories and makes the paradox, as an anti-logic figuration, quite systematically his narrative strategy, on all levels of the text. He translates the regressus ad infinitum, which is the core of the Achilles/Tortoise paradox, from philosophical logic into narrative structure (see also Blüher), thus furnishing a model that would have an immense influence on postmodern writers. In Gass's *The Tunnel*, Kohler, referring to his discovery as a child of his aunt's intricate arrangement of boxes, turns to Zeno's paradox: "so that out of one box a million more might multiply, confirming Zeno's view, although at that age, with an unfurnished mind, I couldn't have known his paradoxes let alone have been able to describe one with any succinctness. What I had discovered was that every space contains more space than the space it contains" (600). In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Gwyard, the artist, despairing of being an artist and instead counterfeiting the art of Flemish painters, says to Valentine the corrupt critic:

But didn't you hear them? racing? Tick. Tick-tick. Zeno wouldn't have, Zeno ... what I mean is add one, subtract anything or add anything to infinity and it doesn't make any difference. Did you hear? how they were chopping time up into fragments with their race to get through it? Otherwise it wouldn't matter. But Christ! racing, the question really is homo — or homoi -, who's who, what I mean is, who wins? Christ or the tortoise? If God's watching, ... Christ! listen (*Rec* 408).

He notes at another occasion: "Good God, today I dishonored death for ten thousand dollars. I'll die like Zeno because he fell and broke a finger coming out of school" (*Rec* 401, see also 420).

In his novel *Mason and Dixon*, Pynchon even uses Zeno's paradox to give shape to the colonization process in America, the irresistible westward movement of the Surveyors, which makes all attempts to stop them fail. Pynchon writes about the relationship

between reality and story in a kind of vision, an alternative open ending added to the actual one:

Suppose that Mason and Dixon and their Line cross Ohio after all, and continue West by the customary ten-minute increments, — each installment of the Story finding the Party advanc'd into yet another set of lives, another Difficulty to be resolv'd before it can move on again. Behind, in pursuit, his arrangements undone, pride wounded, comes Sir William Johnson, play'd as a Lunatick Irishman, riding with a cadre of close Indian Friends, — somehow, as if enacting a discarded draft of Zeno's Paradox, never quite successful in attacking even the rearmost of the Party's stragglers, who remain ever just out of range. Yet at any time, we are led to believe, the Pursuers *may* catch up, and compel the Surveyors to return behind the Warrior Path (706).

Most importantly, as already mentioned, Barth uses both the Achilles/Tortoise paradox and Zeno's Seventh paradox to demonstrate the inexhaustibility of the story: "There are narrative possibilities still unforeclosed. If our lives are stories, and if this story is three-fourths told, it is not yet four-fifths told; if four-fifths, not yet five-sixths, et cetera, et cetera" (*OwS* 30). Zeno's Seventh Paradox, speaking of the relationship between movement and rest, is referred to in the following terms: "If an arrow in flight can be said to traverse every point in its path from bow to target, Zeno teases, and if at any given moment it can be said to be at and only at some one of those points, then it must be at rest for the moment it's there (otherwise it's not 'there'); therefore it's at rest at every moment of its flight, and its apparent motion is illusory" (*OwS* 84-85). In the story therefore, "[t]o the extent that anything is where it is [...] it has no momentum. To the extent that it moves, it isn't 'where it is.' Likewise made-up characters in made-up stories; likewise ourselves in the more-or-less made-up stories of our lives" (*OwS* 86, Barth's emphasis).

Uncertainty, relativity, and multiplicity being the catchwords in postmodern fiction, the Heraclitian paradox also makes sense — that we enter and don't enter the same river, that we are and are not (which, contrary to Zeno's Achilles/Tortoise paradox, was meant to prove the identity of being and motion). In Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* it underlies the structure of the whole novel, which thematizes the impossibility of attaining the one indubitable truth and a true, integrated, unchangeable identity. Burlingame explains to the

protagonist, his former pupil Ebenezer Cooke, when he meets him again after an interval of absence, why he has changed his name, appearance, and manner of speech: “The world can alter a man entirely, Eben, or he can alter himself, down to his very essence [...] a man [...] is a river running seawards, that is ne’er the same from hour to hour [...] how is’t we speak of *objects* if not that our coarse vision fails to note their change? The world’s indeed a flux, as Heraclitus declared: the very universe is naught but change and motion” (*SWF* 140); and Ebenezer must finally admit: “I know of naught immutable and sure!” (143) Barth just like Borges elaborates on and radicalizes the skeptical implications that are inherent in the pre-Socratic paradoxes, thereby recontextualizing their meaning.

Finally, Federman contextualizes his text by making use of Eubulides’s liar-paradox — Eubulides cites Epimedes who, himself a Cretan, says: All Cretans are liars — to explain the concept and method of the New Fiction: “The new fiction points to its own fictionality — it calls its people what they are: Word-Beings. It calls itself a book. The radical irony here (paradox) is the same as the old statement of Zeno [whom he confuses with Epimedes] who affirms that all Cretans are liars, but who also points out that he is a Cretan, thus cancelling both the truth and the lie of his perfect rhetorical statement” (1984, 142). It is obvious that, though world and language are thought to be paradoxical and cannot be integrated in terms of a Truth, this paradoxical state of affairs causes no longer much pain (as it does in Kafka). Suffering, it appears, has given way to a joyful acceptance of, and play with, unending paradoxical possibilities of creating worlds and rewriting truth. But then there is Federman, who, though he rejects truth but writes about it, suggests that one should play with these paradoxical possibilities “according to the rules of the fiction”, which make us encounter “the truth of fiction”, “the truth of a work of art” — quite an amazing statement about the purpose of art by an author who a few lines before said that “the new fiction will not attempt to be meaningful, truthful, or realistic” (1984 142). For the New Fiction the old truth is not the “real” or “pure” truth and has to be replaced by a new (paradoxical) truth. The demand for a new truth in fiction is, of course, not so new. One can encounter similar claims as early as in the Romantic period, and Ezra Pound’s famous dictum “Make it new!” was a tenet of Modernism.

As mentioned above, intertextuality is a key-word for postmodern fiction. The history of thought and its thinkers offers almost all postmodern writers the opportunity to place themselves, in spite of shifting signifiers and fluid worlds, in an intertextual network of positions without losing the transformational and recontextualizing energy. William Gaddis has one of his writers, Jack Gibbs in *JR*, refer to Empedocles's cosmology of strife between order and chaos — he speaks of “one of the pre-Socratics, and the rule of love and the rule of strife in the cosmic cycle of Emp” (48) — implying that it is the phase of chaos that reigns in the present. In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, the corrupt critic Valentine compares his own time negatively with “the Athens of Socrates [...] the most civilized thing that has ever happened on earth” (414). The narrator in Gass's “Mrs. Mean”, from *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories*, has “chosen to be idle [...] to surround [himself] with scenes and pictures; [...] to rest [his] life upon a web of theory” (107). Having “succeeded to the idleness of God” (*HHC* 113), prying on and manipulating other people in order to realize his imaginative projections, he puts himself in the context of ancient Greek philosophers, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc. In the epigraph of *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, Coover quotes playfully from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: “It is here not at all requisite to prove that such an *intellectus archetypus* [God] is possible, but only that we are led to the Idea of it”, suggesting that ideas like “meaning”, “identity”, “God” are only made-up, albeit necessary, human concepts. In *The Public Burning*, Coover presents a newspaper, *The New York Times*, as “The Spirit of History”, thus parodying Hegel's central idea. Martin Halpin, character and narrator in Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, notes playfully: “I suddenly understood Kant's description of the mind as a ‘whatnot’” (233); he also refers to Spinoza, Emerson, Marx, Freud, Wittgenstein, etc. (228, 233, 235, 243, 245, 255). Gass calls himself a Kantian in regard to the role of the imagination and of order: “The whole investigation of the ground, as Kant would say, of the imagination, the conditions of the imagination as such [...] leads to (for me) a theory of fiction, and then finally to a theory of art in general” (Ziegler and Bigsby 154). Barthelme in more or less detail points to, quotes, discusses, or tacitly invokes Pascal, Kierkegaard,

Schlegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, to name only a few.<sup>37</sup>

In many cases the references to philosophers have more than casual significance. As mentioned, Gass calls himself a Kantian. For both Barth and Coover, Plato or Plato and Aristotle serve as frames of reference for theoretical deliberation. Philosophical positions, just like myths and aesthetic traditions, have by now (mostly) lost their aspects of truth and historical context, become part of the available intellectual *material* the authors play with, recontextualize, deconstruct, and reconstruct according to their own *aesthetic* purposes. But this should not detract from the fact that they serve also as veritable signposts in a time that has lost its own values and turns back to history — because history is what we have on our back anyway, to paraphrase Barth. In Barth's *LETTERS* Jerome Bray's computer-constructed NOVEL that develops through a radical reduction process into NOTES and then into NUMBERS, constituting in the process a new genre, "enumerative", is the futile and ridiculous attempt to establish the "*absolute type*", the "*Platonic Form*" (32). Barth says in an interview:

I'm sure *LETTERS* doesn't so much aspire to as stumble towards it. It's certainly not 'the Platonic Form expressed,' but it certainly participates in the Platonic idea that Bray is speaking of. [...] Bray's serious role in the novel is to be a kind of mad, limiting case of preoccupations which are also my preoccupations. The difference is that Bray takes them dead seriously. [...] No novel made out of mere words, mere language, could ever arrive at Bray's notions of formal perfection and purity. [...] At the end of *LETTERS*, you are holding in your hand not the novel that Jerome Bray aspires to compose, not the mad limiting case or the pure form, but something that has [one should add, playfully, comically] fallen from Plato, although it participates in Bray's idea" (Ziegler and Bigsby 34-35).

Coover, in one of the most striking cases of an author placing himself and his own artistic aims in a field of philosophical ideas, locates the new fiction between the poles of Plato and Aristotle. He explains in an interview that with Cervantes

here was a shift from a Platonic notion of the world — the sense of the microcosm as an imitation of the macrocosm and that there was indeed a perfect order of which we could perceive only an imperfect illusion — towards an Aristotelian attitude which, instead of attempting a grand comprehensive view of the whole, looked at each particular subject matter

and asked what was true about it. This was a widespread development of tremendous importance (Gado 143).

Following Coover's train of thought, the interviewer remarks that "Aristotelianism is basically teleological and [...] is biased toward a common sense acceptance of reality; in contrast, Platonism leads us to distrust our senses and to retreat from tactile experience into a cerebral, epiphenomenal universe", and goes on to ask: "Isn't the new fiction, in its delight with abstracting experience, moving in a Platonic direction?" Coover's answer is clear-cut but also interesting in its reservations:

No. We *are* turning back to design — I agree with you on that — and there is an attraction toward modes of inquiry and creation that we rejected as we moved into this Era of Enlightenment. Those forms we associate with Platonism have a certain beauty, and now a potential of irony exists in them. But because we don't believe in a Godhead any more and the sense of a purposeful unity has vanished, a true Platonist would say we are using these things sophistically. The abstractions are empty, aren't they? Even so, they *are* useful. It is easier for me to express the ironies of our condition by the manipulation of Platonic forms than by imitation of the Aristotelian (Gado 143-44).

The references to the philosophers (except perhaps to the pre-Socratic thinkers) are double-edged. They serve to relativize/satirize / comicalize both the narrative situation they are placed in (together with the characters) and the philosophers referred to in a game of mutual ironization. A model case is Gass's "Cartesian Sonata", in which, the text of the dustjacket notes, Gass "redefines Descartes's philosophy. God is a writer in a constant state of fumble. Mind is represented by a housewife who is a modern-day Cassandra. And Matter is, what (and who) else but the helpless and confused husband of mind". And the whole connection of novellas, and Gass's and postmodern fiction in general, work on the premise that, as is remarked in "The Master of the Second Revenge" again with a playful note:

We must set aside, with the greatest respect, of course, Descartes' overly linear view of rational explanation, because revelations are rarely the result of mind's climbing a ladder, such clear and definitely placed rung surmounted foot after foot after foothold like a fireman performing a rescue; they are achieved more in the devious way cream rises to the top of the container: everywhere the thin milk is sinking while simultaneously

countless globules of fat are floating free and slipping upward each alone and as independent of one another as Leibniz's monads until gradually, nearly unnoticed the globs form a mass which force the blue milk beneath, whereupon the sweet cream crowns the carton, waiting to be skimmed (198).

The extreme form of this ironization of philosophic knowledge is the *list* of names (quoted below), which empties each specific position by the others that surround it, by the fusion of order and disorder, the juxtaposition of the "low" and the "high", and by the situation in which they are placed. It demonstrates the exuberance of free creation or helplessness or both. Gass, Barth and Barthelme are most extensive in the play with intertextual relations. Gass, who, like Barthelme and Elkin, is a master of the list, refers in *The Tunnel* to more than a hundred authors and provides listings of names like the following:

a book is a holy vessel —ah, indeed, yes, it will transmogrify a turd. Nordeau. Gentile. Husserl. Hartmann. Bentham. James and John Stewart Mill. And of Goethe, Schiller, Fichte, Schelling —how many? Outside I hear the power mowers mow the snow. Of Herder, Heidegger, Heine, Helmholtz, Spengler, Werfel, Weber? Open any. Karl Jaspers, Ernst Jünger. A crack like a chasm. Vega. Natsume. Quevedo. The creaking door in a horror story. Gorky. Heliiodorus, Apollinaire: the most beautiful names at all" (70).

In a self-reflexive monologue, Kohler considers possible reasons for his inability to finish his book *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*:

Who thus constricts my chest? ... Confucius? that old chink? Livy then? Gibbon? O la! Tacitus? *Gilgamesh*. How many times have I fallen inside a sentence while running from a word? Winckelmann, Kafka, Kleist. You would not believe that long bodiless climb from Descartes to Leibniz. Lewis. Lemuel Gulliver. Catullus. Gogol. Constant. Sterne. I live on a ledge — a sill — of type — a brink. Here. Pascal. Alone. Among the silences inside my books ... Frege, Wittgenstein ... within the rhythms of reason ... the withheld breath, the algebra of alliteration, the freedom of design ... Dryden, Zeno, Stevens, Keats ... (*Tun* 96).

In *The Recognitions*, we have still the list, but Gaddis has the narrator connect the philosophical discourse to a concrete situational context. Mr. Pivner, a non-descript, practical person, who is sitting in a hotel lobby reading Andrew Carnegie on making friends and



“preparing to meet his son, to win him as a friend, and influence him as a person” (530) (while the son, conversely, takes another person for his father, with a number of comic consequences), is measured against the wisdom of philosophers he actually has never read. Among the philosophers referred to are Anaxagoras, Bacon, Confucius, Democritus (three times), Descartes, Nietzsche, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Socrates, the Stoics. The following passage is only an excerpt from the scene but still may give an idea of what Gaddis does in terms of comparison:

Pivner might never have read Democritus, the sire of materialism (judged insane by his neighbors, true, those rare Abderites, who summoned Hippocrates to cure him) [...] Had he read Democritus, he might have discovered, in philosophy’s first collection of ethical precepts [...] that it is the unexpected which occurs. [...] True, Mr Pivner might have read Descartes; and, with tutelage, understood from that energetic fellow well educated in Jesuit acrobatics (cogitans, ergo suming), that everything not one’s self was an *IT*, and to be treated so. But Descartes, retiring from life to settle down and prove his own existence, was as ephemeral as some Roger Bacon settling down to construct geometrical proofs of God (*Rec* 530-31).

While Barthelme says about the function of his lists: “Litanies, incantations, have a certain richness per se. They also provide a stability in what is often a volatile environment, like an almanac or a telephone book. And discoveries”, Gass comments the lists in a different manner: “When I am playing with forms, it is often simply to find a form for garbage. I love lists. They begin with no form at all .... often anyway. A list of names is very challenging. There is one right order and the problem is to find it” (LeClair and McCaffery 43, 166). One might add that these lists not only develop into an order but, conversely, also into a *force* of their own that disrupts “regular” (spatial and situational) order and searches for a more inclusive order (“chaos is an order” [*Tun* 452]). Barth speaks of “the absolute chaos and anarchy of indiscrimination that threatens the novel, that threatens all lists, catalogs, anatomies and the rest” (Ziegler and Bigsby 37).

### 4.3. De-Differentiation and Disjunction

In the third type of interrelation between philosophy and literature, the disjunction between the two modes of discourse is abolished in a de-differentiation or even fusion of the two. This rejection of borderlines results from the belief that there are in fact no clear-cut delimitations between philosophy and literature. Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy leads him to the conviction that philosophy is itself a literary discourse, and that it distinguishes itself from other discourses through rhetorical-literary strategies. In the same vein, Gass notes, "[s]o much of philosophy is fiction. Dreams, doubts, fears, ambitions, ecstasies [...] fiction, in the manner of its making, is pure philosophy" (1970, 3). Ultimately, philosophy flourishes only under an aesthetic perspective: "Pure philosophy can't [sustain its respective values], because objectively they have no grounds; but within the novels, plays, and poems, they make sense and are strangely, radiantly beautiful" (Ziegler and Bigsby 168). The philosopher Odo Marquard thinks that it is necessary for philosophy to relativize its seriousness with the comic mode. He contends that "for philosophy, its own comedy is not only tolerable but vitally necessary; it is the medium in which philosophy sustains those questions for which it is competent" (150). The comic mode plays itself out situationally, and that means only in literary discourse. In literature the separation of theory and imaginary practice almost has ceased to exist. Multiperspectivism is an answer to the new uncertainty and indefiniteness. Literature interrogates its own status as language and fiction, enquires into its own artificiality and the artificiality of its borderlines. The problems of representation are pushed to the fore. Representation includes the representation of the theory of representation, in what has been called "meta-fiction". The first use of this term is attributed to William Gass who tried to find a substitute for the unsatisfactory, ideologically tainted term "anti-[traditional] novel": "Many of the so-called antinovels", he writes, "are really metafiction" (1970, 25). This doubleness is another outflow of the postmodern radical paradox, since it reveals the human mind — to quote Iser, who refers to Vaihinger's "Philosophy of 'as-if'" — in its "duality: it appears equally to be both the source and the yardstick of fictions. In historical terms, fiction has now conquered consciousness, its worst enemy, by imposing its own

doubling structure upon it". And "[t]his duality also means that every fiction must incorporate awareness of its own fictitiousness" (Gass 1996, 131; Vaihinger, Introduction and passim). Postmodern fiction is indeed aware of this situation, and, in one way or another, transposes its awareness into narrative strategies.

A philosopher like Vaihinger, and his "as-if" theory fit exceptionally well the concepts of artistic self-consciousness in postmodern fiction and can serve as a frame of reference for many purposes. The "as-if" double-coding signifies the crucial epistemological problem (reality-fiction); it defines the existential relation between self and world (illusion-imagination-reality); and it refers to the social environment and its (lack of) values (obvious in the being-seeming contrast). There is a wide scope of possible applications of perspectives and terms that shows the wide-ranging, satire-including potential of the imaginary in postmodern fiction. The "as-if" is the most pervasive basis of Barth's metanarrative, his strategies of *make-believe*. His fiction plays with the as-if of American "newness", or of (absolute) values, or of love (*The Floating Opera*, "Dunyazadiad" in *Chimera*), or with the as-if of having a rationalizable plot (*The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *LETTERS*), or the as-if of being a character (*The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*). The narrator faces the possibility that his storytelling is an as-if storytelling ("Menelaiad" in *Lost in the Funhouse*), and even the author has to cope with the problem of being an as-if author (*Giles Goat-Boy*, *Chimera*, *LETTERS*). Barth's comic mode, too, is an as-if comic mode; it represents the comic response "as-if" it were possible and pertinent in full view of all the fearsome facts of life and the ultimate void. In terms of the *self*, "as-if" thinking may lead to "paralyzing self-consciousness" but also can turn into "productive self-awareness" (*Let* 652). In "Anonymiad", the "as-if" attitude enables the minstrel, who is marooned on an uninhabited island, to survive. He speaks of the power of the imagination and, in addition, articulates the poetological concept crucial for Barth and postmodern fiction: "I found that by pretending that things had happened which in fact had not ... I could achieve a lovely truth ... Menelaus, Helen, the Trojan War. It was *as if* there were this minstrel and this milkmaid, et cetera; one could I believe draw a whole philosophy from that *as if*" (*LF* 186). It would be the philosophy of Vaihinger's "als ob". Federman does not use the "as-

if” construction in the way Barth does, but he is an adherent of the conditional “If”: “the governing tense of my fiction is indeed the conditional tense. The supposition implied in the opening sentence already undermines the truth, the reality, the validity, the permanence, and the totalization of what follows in the book. [...] My fiction emerges out of that unfinished, unsettled conditional statement [...] but one could extend that further for an analysis of much of contemporary fiction. I read Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a novel written in the conditional, even though the dominant tense in the book may not seem to be conditional” (LeClair and McCaffery 128-29).

In addition to the epistemological and existential versions of the “as-if”, its social/moral adaptation is pertinent. In Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, the reference to Vaihinger and his “als ob” theory serves to characterize a typically imitative character and a counterfeiting social environment. First, it characterizes Otto, an untalented playwright and would-be intellectual, who mechanically repeats what he thinks is significant in what he hears other people say, and during a conversation tries to call attention to Vaihinger; and, second, it serves to satirize and comicalize the empty, vain, and conceited talk of a crowd of as-if intellectuals and artists. Otto, attempting to attract attention, ironically tries to explain to the non-attentive, self-interested quasi-intellectuals around him Vaihinger’s notion “that we must assume postulates to be true which, if they were true, would justify“ (*Rec* 565). He does not quite understand himself what he is talking about, nor is he able to finish his sentence in the medley of utterances, while Anselm, making fun of Otto (and unintentionally of himself and the crowd), says to the woman standing beside him: “Hannah, sit down, sit down in Otto’s place, he’s delivering a lecture on *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*” (*Rec* 565, see also 566). This is a typical example of how Gaddis and other postmodern authors use intertextual references for multi-perspectival purposes. Philosophical notions are used to characterize the basic underlying, social, epistemological, and ontological conditions. Philosophical concept and the condition of the world fuse.

The as-if can also be seen as the generator of *metafiction*. In its self-referentiality, metafiction is a function that has existed more or less openly throughout the history of the genre (see the intrusive narrators in Fielding, Richardson, Dickens, etc.), but it becomes

obvious and important as the form of self-questioning in modern fiction. Self-consciousness is a distinguishing feature of literary modernism, where the process of cognition generally proceeds via the perceptions, associations, and reflections of the characters' minds, i.e., is grounded in the consciousness of individuals. Yet metafiction in modern (and more so in postmodern) fiction designates more than the term "self-consciousness" suggests. It includes fiction-upon-fiction, the intertextual mode of writing in so-called "historiographic metafiction" (see Hutcheon 1988), the parody of traditional narrative forms and especially in the postmodern narrative meta-mode, the fantastic. Furthermore, though metafiction concerns itself with the "reflexive awareness of the conditions of meaning-construction", it can be conscious or intuitive. It is best defined as "a borderline discourse, [...] a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism", between "discourse and its representation", and which "takes that border as its subject", the border between the narrated situation and the reflection on that situation, on its constructedness and its (lack of) making sense. Far from initiating the end of the novel by dominating narrative and even pushing it aside, metafiction as a double-coded, borderline discourse has rather proved to be an origin of force, "a primary source of energy" (M. Currie 1995, 15, 2, 15, 2),<sup>38</sup> dividing the metafictional function between fiction and criticism, or, rather, fiction and philosophy (since criticism grounds in and makes use of the latter). Metafiction creates the narrated and narrating situations on an equal basis; the fiction constructs the narrated situation in order to decompose and recompose it and often deconstructs with it the autonomy of the narrator, who, with Borges or Barth, sometimes does not know whether he is telling the story in his own name or he is being told the story himself in his role as the teller and thus is only an object in a possible regressus ad infinitum. What remains along the line are as-ifs, the as-if of the status of the fictional world, of the narrator, even of storytelling. All this is conceptualized in terms of Vaihinger's "als-ob" philosophy, which radicalizes Kant's concept of consciousness, which in turn explains why Kant is another reference point for postmodern writers, especially for a writer/philosopher like Gass.

#### 4.4. Mutual Subversion

There is yet a fourth kind of interrelation between narrative writing and philosophical thought, one which is an outcome of the third type (de-differentiation and disjunction) but which nevertheless has its own distinctive characteristics in the playful, ironic, and comic modes of the text's self-representation. This viewpoint involves the radicalization or rather generalization of the deconstructive attitude. In the literary text, the de-differentiation and fusion of philosophy and literature can in fact turn into an active, mutually subversive rivalry between thought and narrative, carried out in an overlay of reflection and imagination. This struggle for domination occurs in spite of the fact that both reflection and imagination, philosophy and fiction, being locked into language and the infinitude of its combinatorial possibilities, work in a kind of metafictional play towards a common end. By means of fantasmatication, meta-narration, sur-fiction, auto-referentiality, and the narrator's self-dramatization, the philosophical and literary discourses relativize, even abolish the truths and meanings that suggest a reference beyond the text, an essence beneath the surface and the closure of the system, also the aesthetic and philosophic systems. The question then is, which is the winner, the deconstructive philosophical attitude of negation or the creative ability of fictional recreation? Can the two work together constructively, or do they contend with each other deconstructively? Yet the consequences of the joint venture of reflection and creation are by no means easy to judge since the possibilities are endless. As Borges writes in *Labyrinths*: "all possible outcomes occur" and "each one is the point of departure for other forkings" (26).

Most subversive to all meaning-building intentions are the constrictive language-theories used in the texts to counter and dramatize creativity. Doubts of the transparency and controllability of language impair the belief in storytelling, too, in its making sense. The need to compose worlds with vacant signifiers without transcendental signifieds, the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable, the infiniteness of the labyrinths of fiction produce not only joyful feelings of freedom and new beginnings but also create a crisis in writing, desperate texts — in spite of the playful, ironic and comic modes in which they may be rendered. In the words of

Barthelme: “Why does language subvert me, subvert my seniority, my medals, my oldness, whenever it gets a chance? What does language have against me — me that has been good to it, respecting its little peculiarities and nicilities, for sixty years” (*UP* 135) — a view that affirms the dominance of language over subject and author and correlates with Heidegger’s notion “that language speaks” (1971, 191),<sup>39</sup> and with Lacan’s statement “that here the subject is spoken rather than speaking” (1977, 71). The language crisis and existential pain enter here an unfamiliar symbiosis. To both language theory and existentialism we turn next.

#### **4.5. Two Basics of Postmodern Fiction: Language Theory and Existentialism**

One set of interrelated philosophical theories that has become especially important for the postmodern novel is made up by the language theories of Wittgenstein and the deconstructionists, especially Derrida, all of whom affirm that language is the world. The deconstructionists further epistemological relativism and ontological uncertainty, propose the view that reality is only the function of the discourse that articulates it, and blur the borderline between reality and fiction. The other set of philosophies, which — surprisingly — has weight with the postmodern novel, does not correlate with the language theories, even clashing with them: the theories of Existentialism. Yet the various forms of existentialist thought have their own deconstructive functions by abrogating philosophic systems of the kind Hegel creates, and they are situationally oriented, aim at the present moment. Heidegger furthermore interconnects theorems of existentialism and language autonomy, and Beckett’s success at doing the same may be one reason why he became an important influence on postmodern authors like Barth, Federman, and a host of other writers. Both sets of philosophies existed side by side in the first half of the century; they are interrelated by the postmodern novelists and often made into one supportive matrix of thought, which then is played with, ironized, comicalized in multiple perspectives and given the form of paradox. The existential view enters the figuration of sense when the joy of liberation from the strictures of reality is rivaled, as it often is, by the anguish about losing the real ground of existence, of failing to reach

the world through language. Play becomes the mediating instance between language autonomy, which allows the limitless games of the imagination and the existentialist fear of having lost a substantialized self and a code for relating to the world. The concept of play in addition to language theory and existentialist thought connects philosophy and literature and makes this relationship complex.

#### 4.5.1. Wittgenstein, Language, and the Postmodern Novel

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1922) addresses the opacity and the limits of language, the inexpressibility of semantics. It is concerned with language-reality relationships, with what language can and cannot do. The book starts out with the application of logic as the method of an a priori definition of the relation between the proposition or rather the image, and its object in reality. But since it is impossible in language to say what a particular object essentially is because of the ineffability of the simple name-object relations, it is impossible to say in language what its logical form is; this holds true also for the logical form of a proposition, since this form consists of the ineffable forms of simple objects. The *Tractatus*, furthermore, separates the realms of the sayable and the unsayable (only showable), and assigns to the realm of the merely thinkable and to silence whatever plays a part in terms of values, ethics, religion, and the "mystical": they fall beyond the limits of expression in language. The book in fact excludes the self from language and thus from being known: "The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world" (5.632). Insisting that language has no essence, that no separate meta-language can be formulated that unifies its manifestations, that the signifiers of language only refer to other signifiers, Wittgenstein in his later works speaks of language as a "maze", describable only as a combination of open-ended and overlapping "language games". They are defined by their "use", not by reality, and can be grouped together merely in terms of their family resemblances, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing" (1958, no. 66). The totally public character of language defines the rules of the language games, a fact which does away with the need of a private subject to initiate them, and actually excludes the possibility of private languages. Giving no secure knowledge, the language games are based on a



series of ultimately unsubstantial but necessary conjectures: strategies of understanding. In spite of the fact that the principle of causality is at best “a class name”, and induction a convenient strategy, such strategies and names allow us to pass through life without questioning reality. Since language has no essence, no essence can be attributed to the world. Representation, which is not the representation of the one “real” world but of possible worlds, is an unending process of articulation. Definitions are “free” to serve many purposes, and can be drawn up as occasion and intention require. The truth of our statements belongs to our linguistic system of reference, which is pre-constitutive of the world and its meaning.

The influence of Wittgenstein of course renders quite different though comparable results in the texts of postmodern writers. William Gass in fact studied under Wittgenstein as a graduate at Cornell, writing his doctoral thesis on language theory. He comments on this experience in his essay “A Memory of a Master”, in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (see also Gass’s “Carrots, Noses, Snow, Rose, Roses” and “At Death’s Door: Wittgenstein”). Together with the “sur-fictionists”, Federman and Sukenick, Gass is perhaps the most extreme of postmodern American authors in asserting the dominance of language over world, to the extent that characters are named, in Federman’s terms, mere “word-beings”, which of course they are — and yet are not. Federman argues in terms of Wittgenstein’s separation of reality and image of reality against the traditional novel and for contemporary fiction: “Traditional realistic fiction does not make any distinction between the real experience and the mental cinema. It confuses the real thing with the illusion of the real thing. Or if you prefer, it makes the illusory mental image pass for the real thing. Well for me, and for most contemporary writers, the mental image is more interesting, more important than the real thing” (LeClair and McCaffery 136).

Literature is the most expressive medium of language. Thus all language-world problems are heightened in literary fiction. Correlated with the problem of how to view the relationship between signifier and signified is the question of whether language and literature are tools of freedom or of necessity. There are two ways of looking at literature and the relationship between “reality”, author, language, text, and reader. On the one hand, literature can be considered, in Roland Barthes’s pointed formulation (out of the spirit

of the Sixties), as “the utopia of language”, i.e., the utopia of freedom, since “there is no reconciliation within the present society” (1970, 83-86). This would strengthen the hand of the author and his or her freedom of choice. On the other hand, the power of language to dominate and direct thought (because thought appears to be impossible without language) is for the late Barthes “quite simply fascist” (1982, 469). Thus the question poses itself, which is the dominant, the human subject or the linguistic system? Does language and literature open up a free space for the imagination, or does subjectivism give way to a kind of deterministic intertextuality, a linguistic “naturalism”, which might even be seen to mirror the oppressive tendencies of the social power system (cf. Barth). And there is a third way to respond to the problematic signifier-signified relationship: complaint, despair at the impossibility to transcend language, to reach “reality” and define truth. For postmodern fiction this third, existentialist reaction to the “linguistic turn”, and the first, exuberant one, are especially important.

Beckett is the author who in the separation of thing and name and the separation of name and meaning finds occasion for endless speculations but also existential pain. The metafictional or rather meta-linguistic form of these reflections exerts great influence on postmodern writers. Molloy notes, “there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names. [...] All I know is what the words know, and the dead things” (*Moll* 31). Beckett describes his worn-out fictions as giving “the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Beckett and Duthuit 18). This is in some ways one of the starting points of postmodern fiction — except that the new fiction leaves the existential trap, resigns the alienation-and-despair theme, recognizes in the vacuum the chance to build new worlds, and opens space for a wide variety of perspectives, play, parody, irony, the comic mode, and an infinite range of transformations, without canceling the existential view, which is almost always there, at least as a horizon for the narrative process.

Pynchon is perhaps the most versatile of those authors who exploit the text-world problem. Like Barth, though in a more existentialist, modern way, he combines the language-world problem with the existential problem of identity and the relationship between

character and society to a perfect symbiosis. He uses the text-object equation for local effects. Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* reads raindrops as "giant asterisks [...] inviting him to look down at the bottom of the text of the day, where footnotes will explain all" (204); or Enzian thinks of himself and his Herero people as the "scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop" (GR 520). But Pynchon goes far beyond this inconsequential play with ideas. In *V.* the letter V. is the sign for the Lady V., a character, the search for whom, for "what she is" (43), is the protagonist's existential task and failure. V. is a signifier without a transcendental signified, or rather with such a multiplicity of signifieds that they are "Nothing but proper nouns" (40), that "the word is in [...] fact, meaningless, based as it is on the false assumption that identity is single, soul continuous" (287). V. is meaningful only as an object and the object is the blank space of Stencil's quest that allows him to interpret (the absence/emptiness of) his goal with multiple stories without facing the danger of an end which would be finite, death. With Pynchon, the language-world and sign-meaning problems become the pattern on which all versions of the absence-presence problem, those of existence and meaning, can be grafted (or vice versa). Paranoia in his novels can thus be understood as both the filling of empty spaces in the signifiers and the resistance against the transcendental signified, the "System" of Authorities, which, although he is subjected to and exploited by it, comes near, however, to being an empty signified, a vacancy, which can be interpreted endlessly — an infinite circular movement of the mind within a closed/open sphere of signifiers. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the signified that Slothrop turns against is the "They"-system that represses the freedom of the individual but, because of its complexity and instable (fictional) reality status, does not step forward to reach the status of a clearly recognizable enemy.

Barth uses the "weakness" of language, the impossibility to reach through and beyond the text to whatever might be called "reality", to dramatize, for instance in "Title" and "Anonymiad" (*Lost in the Funhouse*), the problems facing the artist. The writer/protagonist has both an artistic and existential problem, arising from his being able only to write "as if" he could transcend language. The "as if" is productive but not enough. By failing to constitute

himself as an artist the protagonist fails to constitute himself also as a person. In “Menelaïad”, Menelaus, failing to transcend language and story in his attempt to understand love and identity, regresses into language, into storytelling, into the voice that tells his story or rather the seven cloaks of story that surround and blur his existence. Barth furthermore relates to Wittgenstein’s remark that values cannot be expressed in language and belong to the region of silence. He respects (playfully) the weakness of language, as in, when in “Menelaïad” (*Lost in the Funhouse*), he marks the term love with seven sets of quotation marks (“ ‘ “ ‘ “ ‘ “ love “ ‘ “ ‘ “ ‘ “ “), and designates the answer of the Delphi oracle to Menelaus’s identity question with a blank in the text. A blank also marks the word “death” in *LETTERS*. As all postmodern writers, Barth in his texts metafictionally asserts his theoretical positions. As already mentioned, Jacob Horner in *The End of the Road* makes articulation, and that is also narration, his only remaining, albeit also questionable absolute (and turns his statement into a parody of Beckett’s play with thesis and anti-thesis):

Articulation! There, by Joe, was *my* absolute, if I could be said to have one [...] To turn experience into speech—that is, to classify, to conceptualize, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality. [...] In other senses, of course, I don’t believe this at all (*ER* 119).

Barthelme holds a position between complaint about and affirmation of the fact that our sense-making is restricted to language games. In his version of the “linguistic turn”, Barthelme centers his playful gaze not only on people and worlds, but also on “universes of discourse” (*SW* 44), a view that directs attention to the signifier, the linguistic game in the text, also the inherent incongruity and clichédness of language, and mutually exclusive linguistic fields and discourses. In his narratives the attempt to establish transcendental meaning is aborted because of the shift and tumbling of verbal phrases, the lack of continuity and coherence. In Barthelme’s most

extreme language experiment, the nine page piece "Sentence", consisting in fact of one sentence, he seems to refer to Wittgenstein when he says at the end that the discovery of the limitations of all human systems, and consequently also of language, has been "a disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones" (CL 114). This "weakness" leads to Barthelme's minimalistic imaginative constructs, his attenuation of hard cores, i.e., theme, character, style, and the paring down of the discourse to mere surfaces.

An example of the exuberant response to the liberation of language from reality is Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*. He draws the logical conclusions from and playfully exploits the signifier-signified problem and makes it the basis of his novel. In a light-hearted, playful, and satiric spirit, he uses the title phrase, not, as the reader might expect, to denote a pastoral idyll, but to establish a playing field, a more free vehicle to "situationalize", fantasize, and pluralize the semantic content — thereby satirizing two popular clichés: the unity and wholeness of nature, and America as the New Eden that is close to nature. Since the word and the linguistic phrase exist independent of reality, in fact are constructions of the mind, one may freely and arbitrarily confer signifieds to signifiers and make this process a creative principle in fiction. The phrase "trout fishing in America" comes to mean simultaneously a person, a place, a hotel, a cripple, a costume, a pen nib, a book, etc.

The logical end of these reversals of roles in the relationship between subject and language is the self-subversion and self-cancellation of author and text. Language so to speak obliterates the exertions of the author to make sense, and the writer accepts this result by surrendering narrative to randomness. In Federman's novel *Take It Or Leave It*, the text results from a discourse that operates with four frames and establishes the verbal vacuum of a "story that cancels itself as it goes", working its way "toward unreadability, toward free reading" (ch. 0, xx). What "free reading" means is exemplified in the same book. Chance is here made most rigorously and methodically the exclusive operating principle that negates the traditional orders of sequence and cause and effect so that "all

sections [...] are interchangeable”, and the unnumbered pages can be read in any order one likes (“Summary of Recitation”).

Wittgenstein’s famous opening statement of the *Tractatus*, “The world is all that is the case”, is especially attractive for postmodern writers. It marks both the world-text problem and the futility of the human endeavor of reaching one all-encompassing meta-truth, and thus includes what Nietzsche called “perspectivism”, though now on both an epistemological and ontological level. The phrase becomes a kind of self-explanatory formula. It marks the change of attitude from the modernists’ quest for knowledge and attempt at ordering disorder in modernism to the postmodern acceptance or at least facing of disorder and chaos as “ground-situation” (Barth). With chaos as their starting point, postmodern writers have a salient alternative to the obsessive modern search for transcendent meaning, and ultimately a chance to do new work, to open the world to the creative and liberating play of the imagination. That Wittgenstein’s seminal statement is used for programmatic purposes in postmodern fiction is demonstrated in Max Apple’s short narrative text “Post-Modernism”, from *Free Agents* (1984). It includes “a bit of analysis” and ends with: “Everything is the way it is” (137, 139). In Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*, a final harmony is established by the realization that the Baseball game (just like the game of life) is “not a trial”, nor “a lesson”, but “just what is” (242). A passage in Gass’s *The Tunnel* deals ironically with the subject of facts that are and employs clashing perspectives:

There are facts, but we don’t know them. Nah ... you don’t say? what a pity!

Ah ... then they know us.

Hearing the news, Planmantee’s bottle-bottomed eyeglasses would grow moist with emotion, ready to ring everything in his sight. “*Die Welt ist Alles*”, he would reverentially sigh, “*was der Fall ist*” (416).

Pynchon employs Wittgenstein’s phrase in *V.* as an ironic warning against the hunt for “reality”, “depth”, “connections” beyond the surface (of language). A German officer, Weissmann, thinks he has broken the code of a spy, Mondaugen. The message that he comes up with is “Kurt Mondaugen” in anagram and Wittgenstein’s opening statement in German: “DIEWELTIST-

ALLESWASDERFALLIST". This provokes Mondaugen's biting comment, "The world is all that the case is [...] I've heard that somewhere before" (V. 258-59). The bizarre coincidence mocks both Weissmann's paranoia and the reader's and critic's desire to make connections,<sup>40</sup> and it supplies an implicit warning against all attempts at totalizing and synthesizing interpretation — one that Pynchon's critics have by no means heeded. In Barthelme's collection of stories, *Amateurs*, one of the characters, referring to the current exhaustion and stereotypicality of all notions and discourses, paraphrases Wittgenstein's statement parodically and nostalgically: "The world is everything that was formerly the case" (128). When Elkin says, "everything is true, everything [...] I believe that everything *is* true", (Ziegler and Bigsby 101-102) this is not very different from Wittgenstein's "The world is all that is the case". Finally, Eco's philosophical "thriller", *The Name of the Rose* (1981), whose action takes place in an Italian monastery in late Medieval times, demonstrates how a whole book successfully builds its theme and structure on the opposition of theological and philosophical positions, including Wittgenstein's, while it uses at the same time the detective formula of popular fiction as an operator of spiritual struggle. The typically postmodern metafictional device of double (or multiple) coding is in fact used by the compositional principle of the entire text (detective novel/novel of ideas), and regulates what Eco calls the "disguised quotations from later authors (such as Wittgenstein)", which are set up "as quotations from the [Medieval] period".

#### 4.5.2. Derrida and the "Dissemination" of Meaning

Derrida, in the tradition of Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, deconstructs and demystifies metaphysics, undermines the essence of language, attacks the logocentrism of structuralism, reflects the ideas of philosophy as though in a distorting mirror, and attempts to develop strategies for going to and extending the limits of language. He finds in Saussure's principle of differences "a generator of semantic mazes in which words refer only to words, in an infinite play of difference for which there can be no center" (Thiher 1984, 83). The signifieds that the signifiers articulate exist only as difference and, by being different, contain the "trace" within them of

the other signifieds, all of which are neither fully present nor absent but create an infinite play of reference among signs. Meanings are constantly deferred in time, in a process that Derrida calls “différance” (in contrast to différence) or “dissemination”; they are moved, “disseminated”, to other signs and their meanings, and dismiss any attempt at restricting their possibilities. No system of thought or authority can accommodate these possibilities. Indeed, “[t]he absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (1988b, 110), i.e., also extends it beyond the single text, thus preparing the ground for the intertextual relationships that are so important for postmodern fiction. This referring of one signifier or text to another connects Derrida with Lacan and also Sartre (though not with his essentialism), so that Federman can refer to both Derrida and Lacan in *The Twofold Vibration* and choose a Sartre quote as epigraph for his *Amer Eldorado*: “L’autre, en moi, fait mon langage qui est ma façon d’être en l’autre”.

Yet there is a limit to Derrida’s deconstructive drive. He argues that we cannot think beyond metaphysics and need ordering notions like “center”, and that indeed transcendental concepts serve as the ground of possibility for the linguistic systems that constitute the world. These concepts that we require in order to relate to the world but cannot delimit in their meaning he places “under erasure”, erasing them by putting an “X” on them (an idea he borrows from Heidegger). The dilemma of this double coding provides the groundwork for the most fundamental paradox of postmodern fiction: we continue to recognize and make use of what has been already abolished but remains necessary. The erasure shows the distance from the concept, while its further existence demonstrates the necessity to keep it because there is no substitute. This double-coding is crucial for postmodern fiction. The deconstructive drive, for instance, deconstructs the idea of character by erasing the identity-concept, and the notion of plot by eliminating the cause-and-effect configuration, but still keeps intact their roles as figurations in the distribution of fictional situations. These situations are constituted, in spite of all deconstructive energies and the resulting fantastications, by ideas of space, time, character, and action/event, even if these elements are transformed or not concretized in detail.



Derrida, together with Wittgenstein (and Saussure or Nietzsche), comes to fill the creative stimulating role as “mentor” of postmodern fiction. Derrida’s discussion of the meaning problem, especially the concepts of difference and “différance”, the endless deferral and “dissemination” of meaning, which create ever more possibilities of signification, offers Pynchon the chance, especially in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, to dramatize this deferral of meaning in terms of plot structure by projecting dissemination into the existential quest of the protagonist (for example, Stencil in *V.*). As mentioned above, he searches for the Lady V. who is a signifier without identifiable signified. But she is more than that. By multiplying the meaning of V. into the “V.-jigsaw” (44), into Virginia, Vheissu, Valetta, Veronica, Vera, Venus, Vogelsang, vicious, venery, vectors, etc., by sending her from place to place all over the world — “V. in Spain, V. on Crete: V. crippled in Corfu” (364) — and in fact suspecting her to be involved in a conspiracy and in world affairs, even in “the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name” (210) — she becomes a puzzle. On the one hand her whole being “did add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects” (419), but, on the other, she creates further narrative potential. The riddle produces suspense and motivation for the protagonist Stencil to solve it, and the will to solve the riddle drives him on to his obsessive search, though indeed “he didn’t know what sex V. might be, nor even what genus and species” (210), and V. finally “was a remarkably scattered concept” (364). By considering the possibility that she is only a hallucination of Stencil’s mind, by denying her metamorphoses any “continuity” and any “logic” (310) and Stencil’s quest any end, by making her finally into an inanimate object consisting of replaceable mechanical pieces that come apart, dismantling the “person” into a heap of matter, Pynchon establishes, and at the same time defers and “disseminates”, the decisive dualities that are the basis of all his books and serve as material for deconstruction: the oppositions between reality and fiction, intention and accident, conspiracy and randomness, animate and inanimate, in short, meaning and non-meaning. He thus creates progress and teleology, and then drowns them in simultaneity and the excess of possibilities (see also Wills and McHoul).

With regard to narration, Derrida generates two crucial ideas, which correspond to and define intellectual trends of the Seventies

and Eighties and, as suggested above, correlate with the tendencies of postmodern American fiction, namely: that (1) in spite of the decentering of discourses, centering and ordering concepts still abide, though they appear “under erasure”, and that (2) the signified only exists as difference and deferral. The first proposition, in connection with Heidegger’s absence-presence configuration of Being, serves to establish some kind of center or “depth”, which, however, remains undefined or uncertain in its outlines, like Pynchon’s “System” or Hawkes’s “terroristic universe”, and which, in existential terms, finally becomes the void. The second axiom causes the infinite transformations of the imaginary, the multiplication of every narrative unit, the play with endless possibilities, and the proliferation of endings.

#### 4.6. Existentialism

As mentioned, William Spanos, one of the founders of the influential *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature and culture*, and an early promoter of postmodernism in the 1970s, claimed that “the postmodern imagination [...] is an existential imagination” (1972, 148). What he is implying is that the existential imagination’s purpose is “to engage literature in an ontological dialogue with the world on behalf of the recovery of the authentic historicity of modern man” (166). With reference to Sartre, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Frisch, and Pynchon, he speaks of a “postmodern anti-literature of the absurd”, which demonstrates “the primordial not-at-home, where dread, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger and Sartre and Tillich tell us, becomes not just the agency of despair but also and simultaneously of hope, that is, of freedom and infinite possibility” (Spanos 1972, 156). But the course of the 1970s gave him little reason to hope for the development of an existentialist postmodern literature as a counterforce to the “onto-theological” Western tradition, a counterforce that he came to understand not only in chronological but also in typological terms, so that for him “postmodernism is not fundamentally a chronological event, but rather a permanent mode of human understanding” (Spanos 1979, 107). By the end of the 1970s Charles Altieri who had first joined the existentialist wave, saying that “God for the contemporaries manifests himself as energy, as the intense expression of immanent

power” (1973, 610), later reconsidered: “In post-modern writing there is very little that allows any direct application to existential situations except as ironic stances for negotiating a world so full of signifiers it must be empty of beliefs” (1979, 98).<sup>41</sup>

The question of course is what are “ironic stances” and what are their functions and purposes. The disruptive impulse of postmodern fiction, following the deconstructionist turn, deconstructs the individual subject necessary for an existentialist stance and defies all univocal attitudes and monolithic modes by the multiplicity of discourses, of allusions and comments, by redundancy and inconsistency. The shifting orders and juxtaposed configurations of the text, however, open up a “dialogic space” (Bertens) for various and contradictory positions, a circumstance which allows us “to reinstall and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge” (Hutcheon 1988, 1-2), including the existentialist views. The ironic stance indeed needs the “dialogic space” and the play with heterogeneous material in order to attain what Venturi calls “the difficult unity of inclusion”, in contrast to the modernist “easy unity of exclusion” (*Complexity* 16), and to provide for the double or multiple coding of the text, superimposing a new meaning on an old one. Playing with the old beliefs and attitudes means reconstructing them under whatever viewpoint; and being reconstructed, they play their own game and make themselves heard, if necessary even “under erasure”, as presence in absence, as the void underlying all games of the imagination. The utterances of postmodern authors themselves demonstrate their contact with existentialism.

Postmodern writers were born and grew up in the climate of existentialism. The emphasis on human resistance against a meaningless universe made existentialism (and the absurd) particularly attractive after World War II. It was the climate of existentialism that shaped post-war art in general and the novels of Bellow, Mailer, Malamud, Roth, or Updike, in particular, though there were also clear signs of dissatisfaction with and dissolution of this monolithically serious, existential basis of literature, which had appeared to become exhausted. Saul Bellow, who wrote two existentialist novels (*Dangling Man* [1944] and *The Victim* [1947]) at the beginning of his career, later decided that if he had a choice between complaint (about alienation) and comedy he would choose

comedy and began what he called his “mental comedy” with *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Yet the influence of existentialism remained pervasive. Elkin says: “Like most people of my generation, I fell in love with the philosophy of existentialism” (LeClair and McCaffery 109). Gass teaches philosophy courses about contemporary aesthetics and, among others, about “Heidegger, Bachelard, Sartre, and so on” (174). Barth writes, “I had picked up from the postwar *Zeitgeist* some sense of the French Existentialist writers” (1995, 257). Barthelme admits to having become “acquainted with [...] Husserl, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and company” (LeClair and McCaffery 34-35), and he says in another interview: “As to ‘deeper cultural sources,’ I have taken a certain degree of nourishment (or stolen a lot) from the phenomenologists: Sartre, Erwin Straus, etc”. (Bellamy 1974, 52). What he took from them is probably the idea of anxiety. When in an interview he qualifies his former statement that “the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century”, he adds: “Maybe I should have said that anxiety is the central principle of all art” (52). But his view of Heidegger, quoted below, shows his reservations, which then again are balanced by a sense of deficiency and nostalgia. Hawkes, finally, says in an interview, after discussing Camus’s influence on his *Travesty*, in a typically ambivalent statement: “But now I think our discussion has left me a romantic existentialist, which is surely an anachronism in this postmodern world of ours” (Ziegler and Bigsby 181).

All concepts that imply wholeness, the notions of ego, of identity, and authenticity, the idea of centeredness, Heidegger’s concept of “Being”, are devaluated and played with in postmodern fiction, but they are still present as an inevitable horizon of existence against which the ironic imagination throws its darts. For Barth, such a constellation of surface and (denied) depth takes on its concrete form in the opposition of put-on mask and individual core. It serves as the matrix of characterization inasmuch as the mask is quite consciously and obviously set in contrast to the existentialist concept of essence. This kind of antagonism between existentialist and counter-existentialist positions defines Barth’s early novels and not only them. In *The Floating Opera*, Todd Andrews tries to overcome his supposed heart condition (which turns out to be a self-deception) by creating a sort of philosophical system involving the adaptation of

masks, those of the depraved, the holy, and the cynic, only to realize, however, that “*Nothing has intrinsic value*” (223). This does not help much and is finally replaced by the perception that “in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn’t be regarded as in no way inferior and even lived by” (*FO* 252). Such a solution, teaching the abolishment of absolutes and the suspension of the concern with death, in this book still avoids the clash between mask and core, opening a way out of the predicament of life.

In *The End of the Road*, Barth radicalizes this opposition between absoluteness and relativism by confronting the mask with the ego in more closely existentialist terms. Jacob Horner, the protagonist, suffers from an illness characterized by immobility and paralysis of the will. A black doctor, “a kind of superpragmatist”, (79) who is a specialist in the treatment of such an illness takes Horner to his farm and introduces him to the art of “mythotherapy”. The presuppositions of this “mythotherapy” are “that human existence precedes essence, if either of the terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will” (*ER* 82). Consequently the doctor advises Horner to read Sartre but relativizes Sartre’s philosophy by taking his position to the “end of the road”. He explains to Horner the necessity of giving up the idea of a center. He should assign roles, or in the doctor’s term, “masks”, to himself: “It’s extremely important that you learn to assume these masks wholeheartedly. Don’t think there’s anything behind them: *ego* means *I*, and *I* means *ego*, and the ego by definition is a mask. Where there’s no ego — this is you on the bench — there’s no *I*” (*ER* 84-85). But the doctor’s therapy fails because Jacob’s ego won’t disappear. The catastrophe at the end, Rennie’s death during the incompetent abortion of her child makes it impossible for rational understanding and emotional response to come together. The masks fall, or in the doctor’s words: “Mythotherapy would have kept you out of any involvement, if you’d practised it assiduously the whole time. [...] you’ve made yourself a penitent when it’s too late to repent” (*ER* 172). Barth parodies not only the notion of essence in the concept of character, but also ironizes (and ponders on) the concept of Being in almost all his books. An example of his ironization of existentialist concepts occurs in a love scene in *Giles Goat-Boy*, where a boy, in order to overcome a girl’s timidity and her half-hearted resistance, lectures

her — in implied reference to Heidegger and existentialism — on “Beism”: “you’ve got to *be*, chickie! *Be! Be!*” (34) Barth furthermore told an interviewer with regard to *Giles Goat-Boy*: “I’m not sure that synthesis is possible [Being and Self would be possible terms for such a synthesis]. And I’m not terribly interested in it anyhow” (Prince 57).

Barthelme is more direct in rejecting existentialist notions. In *Snow White* we are told, “Jean Paul Sartre is a Fartre” (66), and Snow White explains her poem, in terms of Sartre, as a means of “the self armoring itself against the gaze of The Other” (59). The story “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” from *Guilty Pleasures* (1963) takes on Heidegger directly:

Quickly, quickly. Heidegger suggests that “Nothing nothings” — a calm, sensible idea with which Sartre, among others, disagrees. (What Heidegger thinks about nothing is not nothing.) Heidegger points us toward dread. Having borrowed a cup of dread from Kierkegaard, he spills it and in the spreading stain he finds (like a tea-leaf reader) Nothing. Original dread, for Heidegger, is what intolerabilizes all of what-is, offering us a momentary glimpse of what is not, finally a way of bumping into Being. But Heidegger is far too grand for us; we applaud his daring but are ourselves performing a homelier task, making a list. Our list can in principle never be completed, even if we summon friends or armies to help out. [...] And even if we were able, with much labor, to exhaust the possibilities, get it all *inscribed*, name everything nothing is not, down to the last rogue atom, the one that rolled behind the door, and had thoughtfully included ourselves, the makers of the list, on the list — the list itself would remain. Who’s got a match? (*GP* 164)

This text, as well as the famous passage from Barthelme’s *Snow White* about the “trash phenomenon” that may well grow to “soon reach a point where it’s 100 percent” (97), makes clear that, instead of the vertical dimension of depth and essence, now the horizontal one of *completion* comes to establish the utopian dimension of language. Completion of “the list”, however, is never to be achieved, since language has “[1] an ‘endless’ quality, and [2] a ‘sludge’ quality” (96), and meaning is infinitely disseminated or deferred (Derrida). This concept is exemplified in *Snow White*, in Gass’s *The Tunnel*, or in Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* by lists of disparate material running over pages, demonstrating both the incompatibility of the items of those lists and their “sludge” quality. In all these cases no completion is possible, only an ersatz

completion and an ersatz satisfaction. Indeed, for Barthelme, “‘sense’ is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves [...] arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having ‘completed’ them” (106), i.e., of having completed reading the lines of signifiers, but not having made unifying sense of the signifieds. Since Barthelme’s target is the clichéd language, the philosophical jargon, rather than the substance of thought, the jargons are exchangeable. He says in an interview that, instead of parodying stereotyped existentialist popularizations in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account”, “[y]ou could do the same story today and substitute the current vocabulary and very little of the structure of the story would have to be changed. Call it ‘Lacanthrope’” (O’Hara 1981, 207-8).

Still, there always resides in the background of what Heidegger calls “Gerede”, or the fallen language of everydayness, or, in Barthelme’s terms, the “trash phenomenon”, another domain. It may be played with and ironized, but it establishes an additional horizon of (depth) meaning, even *ex negativo*. Heidegger’s “Being” is such a case. The deconstruction of logo-centric ways of thinking in postmodernism goes hand in hand with the opening up of another transcendental space, not only with Heidegger but also with the poststructuralists, who have more directly influenced American literature and literary criticism. Thus Derrida’s claims that we cannot think beyond metaphysics and that transcendental concepts cannot be abolished appear again to hit the mark. Metaphysics serves as the ground of possibility for the language system that constitutes the world.

Postmodern fiction exemplifies this presence of metaphysics in its absence. Examples can be taken from narrative treatments of angst. The existential experience of angst is the precondition for apprehending Being, however imperfectly and obliquely. Angst is the reaction to the “fallenness” and “thrownness” of humans, the nothingness that opens up below the surface of every day life and its “Gerede”. According to the existentialist philosophers, angst marks the human ground-situation. The reaction of postmodern writers to this basic situation is ambiguous. Barth’s writer/protagonist in “Life-Story”, from *Lost in the Funhouse*, questions the existentialist definition, even the very existence of such a human ground-situation:

“You say you lack a ground-situation. Has it occurred to you that that circumstance may be your ground-situation?” (115) And Barthelme refutes the ground-situation. Humankind in *The Dead Father* is no longer able to “tolerate the anxiety” (119). Thus art becomes an attempt to get away from despair to achieve ease and bliss. But while both authors appear to marginalize the problem of self and its authentic identity (which occupied the modern novel to the degree of obsession), the lack of anxiety is sensed as deficit. The “author of novels and stories” from Barth’s “Life-Story”, for instance, is in a depressed mood. The fact “that there was at this advanced page still apparently no ground-situation suggested that his story was dramatically meaningless. If one regarded the absence of a ground-situation, more accurately the protagonist’s anguish at that absence and his vain endeavors to supply the defect, as itself a sort of ground-situation, did his life-story thereby take on a kind of meaning?” (123) Barth’s answer is at least in part ambiguous, and Barthelme’s, too. One character in the latter’s *City Life* says to another: “Yours is not a modern problem. [...] The problem today is not angst but lack of angst” (165); and he adds in the statement quoted above, “anxiety [or angst] is the central principle of all art”. Angst, even if it is not overcome by reaching some kind of meaningful (metaphysical) horizon, at least constitutes meaning insofar as it asserts the value of life and the self, and discounts one of the biggest problems of the postmodern novel: entropy. If there is no angst, it must be produced creatively, even artificially, as mental construct. In that case it takes the shape of paranoia, as in Pynchon’s novels. If anxiety and anguish become too much to bear, if they open up the “nothingness” beyond everydayness without offering a chance of transgressing concern and angst, there is only the further possibility of suicide, as it occurs in John Hawkes’s *Travesty* (1976).

#### 4.7. Death and the Absurd

The one existentialist concept that became most important for postmodern fiction is the idea of the absurd. One of the reasons for this is that the absurd in the meaning Camus gave it is already a reduction of existential concepts promoted by Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger, or Jaspers. Camus renounces the possibility of conquering the absurd through what was called the “leap”, the “jump to



God's side" (Kierkegaard), the affirmation of the circle of Life (Nietzsche), the recourse to "Being" (Heidegger), Truth (Jaspers), essential Freedom (Sartre). In the search of meaningfulness, these philosophers acknowledge different types of essential experience, which the modernist writers also reflect in their own texts. In *The Myth of Sisyphos*, which is the classical text for Camus's concept of the absurd, even though he modified some of his positions in later writings, there is no metaphysics or essence, nor any saving "leap" into a sort of metaphysics of existence: there is only the disjunction between the human being and the universe. Camus criticizes attempted solutions by existentialist philosophers as "philosophical suicide" (31): "That forced hope is religious in all of them" (24). He does not want to reintegrate the absurd but intends to remain in dissension and inner strife.

The absurd consciousness is an attitude, chosen by or thrown on a person; it exists only "in man's universe" (26). It is neither rational nor irrational, and features no ordering principle; in its world "chaos", "chance and "equivalence" dominate. This world does not permit belief "in the profound meaning of things" (54). Once "a man [...] has become conscious of the absurd [he] is forever bound to it" (24), and it becomes "a passion, the most harrowing of all" (17). This means "rebellion". Though the absurd hero cannot penetrate into the depths of hidden meaning, which always remains hidden for him — "absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself" — "in that day-to-day revolt [he] gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance"(41). Death is the only boundary. But the experience of the absurd inaugurates something new: the experience of freedom —not freedom as such, i.e., "metaphysical freedom" (41), which is of no interest, but rather one's own personal freedom "of thought and action" (42), the right to "absurd freedom". For the absurd man, law is consciousness of contradictions (which requires absolute clarity and constant awareness) and rebellion (which demands freedom of action). Both belong together.

The "absurd man" lives as intensely as possible, without guilt, hope, or future, experiences joy in his existing solely in the "succession of presents" (47), lives "out his adventure within the span of his lifetime" (49). He makes the leap into meaning not "vertically", but, so to speak, "horizontally" and quantitatively by the collection of simultaneously intensive and diversive moments of

existential experience. The diversivity of experience protects the person from exhaustion by mere devitalizing repetition. Don Juan, the lover, then the actor, and the traveler, are therefore preeminently absurd figures. They combine in their lives diversity with intensity. Camus paradoxically demands a combination of what he calls “quantity ethic” (variety, diversity and change) with “quality ethic”. The latter is again in itself contradictory. It demands both the (reflexive) consciousness of universal absurdity and the (active) enjoyment of moments of intensive living.

The absurd is used by postmodern writers as an undefined word for purposes of reference, as a framework for reflection, a philosophical matrix for the fictional design, or as atmospheric background of existential fears and needs. They transfer the absurd from one role to the other, deconstruct and reconstruct, playfully de-existentialize and re-existentialize it. They thus adjust the absurd to their own purposes, focusing on some aspects of the absurd and leaving out others. The abandonment of an essentialist and centralist structure of the universe, its transformation into nothingness, could go well with deconstructive postmodern ideas. The fixation of “absurd man”, the inalterability of absurd consciousness, its mono-maniacal need for rebellion and freedom of action obviously do not fit so well. Camus’s allegedly post-existential interpretation of absurd consciousness retains the existentialist fixity of perspective and worldview. It has as its basis pain and suffering. What makes the absurd still attractive and fertile for the postmodern imagination, however, is exactly its paradoxical character: the contradictions between meaningless universe and the meaning-setting gesture of the individual, between acceptance of unreasonableness and resistance against it, between the rigidity and painfulness of absurd consciousness and the joyful fulfilling of one’s life span, between the “quantity ethic” of experiencing diversity and the “quality ethic” of experiencing intensity, between the self-asserting clarity of mind and the self-abandoning ecstasy of love, between, finally, consciousness and “life”. The concept of the absurd is particularly interesting to postmodern fiction, because, being a kind of “reduction model” of existentialist thought, its paradoxical features offer space for many variations and quite different accentuations. It is interesting as a paradigm for the critic of postmodern narrative not only because it has heuristic value for the analysis of the individual text (e.g., of

Pynchon's novels), but also because its use by the writers throws light on the relationship between postmodern fiction and existentialist thought in general.

The ambivalences of Camus's system of thought, for instance, allow Hawkes to change emphasis. He speaks of the "fundamental necessity" always to create and to throw into new light our potential for violence and absurdity" (Dembo and Pondrom 6). However, he also says: "I have a sense of Camus's hero, the figure in heroic struggle against meaninglessness, but to me what's important is the first recognition of meaninglessness, or the sheer insistence on meaninglessness, which lies at the center of my work" (Ziegler and Bigsby 176). In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, what everybody allows everybody else is the "right to perform in allegory, to redeem, as best his number imagination would permit him, the absurdity of reality" (222). In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* we read of the protagonist that "[t]hose like Slothrop, with the greatest interest in discovering the truth, were thrown back on dreams, psychic flashes, omens, cryptographies, drug-epistemologies, all dancing on a ground of terror, contradiction, absurdity" (582). Coover is obsessed with "life's inscrutable absurdities" (*PD* 117); and Camus is one of the four writers of the twentieth century that have influenced Federman (the others are Proust, Céline, Beckett).

Gass, finally, demonstrates how the aesthetic mode can resurrect and revitalize exhausted concepts like the absurd, by concentrating not on their truth value but their beauty as system of thought. The best place for these concepts is in fiction, since the philosophical views "objectively [...] have no grounds. [...] yet]within the novels, plays, and poems, they make sense and are strangely, radiantly beautiful" (Ziegler and Bigsby 168). In a kind of possibility-thinking, Gass is able to appreciate Camus and many other authors (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Plotin, Kant, Dante, Goethe). He in fact proclaims as the appropriate attitude towards the history of ideas what we have called the aesthetic attitude:

A novel has to build its own system. So within Camus I can be a sort of crude existentialist. I'm not an existentialist; I think it's a lot of baloney; but in Camus I accept it. [...] You enter these various systems believing they are beautiful. I am teaching Plotinus, and I think: it is so magnificent; there is nothing I believe about it; yet this is a work of great art. [...] Philosophy is full of such aesthetic moments, of moments when you shift

into the only gear that really succeeds, and that is an aesthetic mode (Kierkegaard would hate this) [...] An aesthetic theory which is really forced to throw out this and throw out that — whole areas — just won't do. [...] That means that you must have a theory of sufficient generality that it understands the grounds of aesthetic experience itself. It should not exist just to be partisan for a particular mode. The same is true for philosophy (Ziegler and Bigsby 165-67).

In the following section, Hawkes's *Travesty* and Barth's story "Night-Sea Journey" from *Lost in the Funhouse* serve to demonstrate the interaction of philosophical concept and fictional design, of reflection and imagination.

#### 4.7.1. Suicide and Clarity, Design and Debris: John Hawkes, *Travesty*

In postmodern fiction the absurd is used as the aesthetic conceptual frame for anxiety and anguish as well as for rebellion against meaninglessness. Hawkes's novel *Travesty* is an example of what the postmodern author under the influence of Camus can do with the idea of suicide. In this case, Hawkes abandons Camus's negative view on suicide in favor of a fascination with the experience of death as the limit. He then relativizes this view by putting in question the reality-status of the reported death scheme, making it into a possibility, rather than a fictional actuality. Hawkes in an interview speaks about the genesis of *Travesty*:

I recalled Camus's idea that we can't really live without first answering the question, "Why not suicide?" [...] I more or less followed the pattern of *The Fall* but subverted Camus's question so that it became, not "Why not suicide?", but *how* suicide, *when*, and *where*. I was interested not in how to live but in what could be most taxing to the imagination. It came to me that cessation was the only thing unimaginable. Cessation and the "existence of that which exists no longer" are the only concerns of my narrator. [...] whereas *The Fall* is about the "prison" of Christian guilt, *Travesty* is about a nameless man who sheds guilt, turns perversity into an act of courage, and experiences what it is to be a poet (Ziegler and Bigsby 180-81).

In *Travesty*, a man (Papa) who is driving a powerful sports car along a deserted road in the deepest darkness of the night with the unshakable intention of ramming the automobile after a ride of one hour and forty minutes into a thick stone wall and thus causing his

and his companions' deaths, demands from his two co-travellers, his daughter Chantal in the back seat, who is vomiting from fear, and Henry, the lover of his wife and daughter, sitting on the seat beside the driver, the clarity of absurd consciousness (the necessity of which Camus strongly emphasizes). In the course of his obsessively self-contained discourse, the driver says that he has "never expected anything at all from my life except clarity. I have pursued clarity as relentlessly as the worshippers pursue their Christ" (104-5); and he expects the others to strive for that clarity too:

in all this [our own situation] there is clarity but not morality. Not even ethics. You and Chantal and I are simply traveling in purity and extremity down that road [...] What does it matter that the choice is mine, not yours? That I am the driver and you the passenger? Can't you see that [...] we are dealing with a question of choice rather than chaos? (14)

The emerging clarity would reveal to them the fundamental contradiction of life (which parallels the new paradigm of order and disorder proposed by the chaos and catastrophe theories), i.e., "the design that underlies all [...] rambling [...] Design and debris, I thrive on it" (27). Suicide as design is the design of freedom, as necessity, death, is the design of chaos, "the point being that if design inevitably surrenders to debris, debris inevitably reveals its innate design" (59). The joyful living-out of one's life's adventures under what Camus calls the "quantity ethic" is no longer enough to create meaning by defiance, because experiences become repetitive, exhaust themselves: "there is nowhere I have not been, nothing I have not already done" (75). Experiences can lead to clarity but cannot provide coherence, a design. Only death can "complete" a life; death alone is able to relieve a person of the necessity of being "always moving", "forever transporting myself somewhere else"; it alone can fulfill "the propensity of mine toward total coherence" (75). In fact,

we rush off to die precisely because death's terrible contradiction (it will come, we cannot know what it is; it is totally certain, it is totally uncertain) for some of us fills each future moment, like tears of poison, with an anguish finally so great that only the dreaded experience itself provides relief" (82-83).

The clarity and definiteness of this suicidal decision-making is then relativized by the author's play with the reality status of the drive itself. It is not clear whether the narrated situation is actual or

only imaginary, since the driver is simultaneously the victim and the narrator of his own intentions, which if they were carried out would make it impossible for him to narrate the situation in the car (unless he had rehearsed it before the fact, and even then the outcome would still be in doubt). Thus the situation and its conclusion remain ambiguous, uncertain, and contradictory. The clarity and anguish of the absurd consciousness are supposedly purified, purged of “pollution” caused by the games of living, and radicalized in the free choice of death as joyful gesture of defiance — only to be suspended, if not reversed, by the ironic form of the novel manifested in the gap between language/story and reality.

Still, whatever one might call a “metaphysical” horizon, here it is clearly in evidence. Terms like “design” and especially “total coherence” have a note of absoluteness. This absoluteness takes the form of the absence-presence configuration that is the basis and the focal constellation of postmodern strategies. The presence/absence of total coherence in the world is here reflected in the presence/absence of the subject at the intended experience of such coherence, in death, and the presence/absence of the death scheme is mirrored in language. Meaning adopts the form of paradox, which is, according to Hawkes, the “significant shape” of the novel: “[T]he terrifying similarity between the unconscious desires of the solitary man and the disruptive needs of the visible world” take best “the shape of [a] meaningful psychic paradox” (1962, 787). The paradox is a ground-figuration in Hawkes’s novels. He chose the of *The Blood Oranges* phrase because “[t]he fruit is sweet, but it’s streaked with the color of blood, which to me is a paradox” (Bellamy 1974, 104-5). Paradox as a figure of indissoluble contradiction can be played with, ironized and comicalized, but it cannot be abolished; it is always present as a basic fact of language, fiction and the world in postmodern narrative. It opens the void. The penchant for paradoxical absence/presence figuration in postmodern fiction at least partly explains, in spite of all playful modification of the discourse, the leaning towards death especially in novels by Hawkes and Pynchon, Coover, Federman, and Elkin. In Lacan’s words:

That is what life is — a detour, a dogged detour [...] deprived of any significance. Why [...] does something happen, which insists throughout this life, which is called a meaning? [...] A meaning is an order which suddenly emerges. A life insists on entering into it, but it expresses something which is perhaps completely beyond this life, since when we get to the root of this life [...] we find nothing besides life conjoined to death (1991b, 232).

#### 4.7.2. The Absurdity of the Absurd: John Barth, “Night-Sea Journey”

Barth, too, uses the idea of suicide discussed by Camus, in both the later writer’s existentialist and postmodern phases. In his early novel, *The Floating Opera*, he implicitly follows Camus in rejecting suicide; later, in *Lost in the Funhouse* he employs it as part of a pattern of ambiguities and ironies. When Barth was asked whether Camus’s discussion of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphos* had influenced the characterization of Todd Andrews and the suicide theme in *The Floating Opera*, his first (existentialist) novel, he replied: “There certainly may be similarities between them, but it didn’t color my work because I haven’t read *The Myth of Sisyphos*” (Dembo and Pondrom 27). But he confirms that the absurd and Camus’s version of absurd consciousness strongly influenced the intellectual climate of the time that saw the dominance of the theater of the absurd between 1950 and 1962: “I believe Camus says the first question that a thoughtful man has to ask himself is why he is going to go on, then make up his mind whether to blow his brains out or not; at the end of *The Floating Opera* my man decides he won’t commit suicide because there’s no more reason to stop living than to persist in it” (27).

The stories in the collection *Lost in the Funhouse* exemplify how the existentialist concept of the “absurd” can be used to link in fiction the discourse of the actual, of being, to synthesize answers, and the counter-discourse of the possible, of moving, deconstructive questions. The word “absurd”, in all aspects of its meaning, is a pivotal target of reflection and imagination. All four positions of the absurd — the empty universe, the freedom of the heroic self in conscious rebellion, the self living life to the full and exhausting itself, the rejection of suicide combined with the necessity of death — ironize one another and are refracted into manifold variations and reversals. In “Night-Sea Journey”, what appears to be a self-

conscious traveler reflecting on the imponderables of life turns out to be not a person but a sperm cell on its nocturnal journey to the egg cell. While thousands of sperm cells “drown” every second, the survivors stay afloat by singing “Love!” The narrator swims in a stream with millions of his fellows toward some unknown, only intuitively grasped destination. It is by this fantastic transformation of life’s journey that Barth secures a fusion of playfulness and existential concern.

Right from the beginning, the spermatozoon, addressing himself in an interior dialogue as a person in “wonder, doubt, despair” (*LF* 4), embarks on the search for the meaning of meaning. In order to clarify the preconditions and goals of existence and knowledge, he argues on a meta-level of thought, questioning, employing what Kant calls “transcendental reflection”, trying to answer both existential and epistemological questions:

Is the journey my invention? Do the night, the sea, exist at all, I ask myself, apart from my experience of them? Do I myself exist, or is this a dream? Sometimes I wonder. And if I am, who am I? The Heritage I supposedly transport? But how can I be both vessel and contents? Such are the questions that beset my intervals of rest (3).

Trying to answer these existential questions, the narrator first reflects not in terms of perplexity and dismay but in those of playfulness and possibility-thinking. He finally focuses on the absurd and uses its notions to reverse and at the same time to reinstate traditional philosophical and theological positions without being bound to the formal rules that logic requires for weighing evidence.

My trouble is, I lack conviction. Many accounts of our situation seem plausible to me — where and what we are, why we swim and whither. But implausible ones as well, perhaps especially those, I must admit as possibly correct. Even likely. If at times, in certain humours — striking in unison, say, with my neighbors and chanting with them “Onward! Upward!” — I have supposed that we have after all a common Maker, Whose nature and motives we may not know, but Who engendered us in some mysterious wise and launched us forth toward some end known but to Him — if (for a moodslength only) I have been able to entertain such notions, very popular in certain quarters, it is because our night-sea journey partakes of their absurdity. One might even say: I can believe them *because* they are absurd. Has that been said before? (3)



In the manner of Borges' "The Library of Babylon", the swimmer refers to a whole canon of thought and builds an intertextual realm of imaginative and reflective orders, suggesting that the real is indeed mere thought and theory. Yet he does not give up Camus's existentialist ideas of the absurd. The absurd is the underlying matrix of the argument and connects to the actual situation, i.e., the "dull dread and a kind of melancholy, stunned persistence" that is all that remains after losing belief in "vanity, confidence, spirit, charity, hope, vitality" (9):

I've heard some say, even as they gulped their last: 'The night-sea journey may be absurd, but here we swim, will-we nill-we, against the flood, onward and upward, toward a Shore that may not exist and couldn't be reached if it did.' The thoughtful swimmer's choices, then, they say, are two: give over thrashing and go under for good, or embrace the absurdity; affirm in and for itself the night-sea journey; swim on with neither motive nor destination, for the sake of swimming (5).

What results from the imaginative/reflexive progress of the story is a double paradox. The one is modern/existentialist in the spirit of (modern) Nietzsche, stating that destruction is creation and creation destruction. For the spermatozoon the egg cell is the "mysterious being, indescribable except by paradox and vaguest figure: wholly different from us swimmers, yet our complement; the death of us, yet our salvation and resurrection; simultaneously our journey's end, mid-point, and commencement" (9-10). The story, however, closes with a word of (postmodern) defiance that unravels the synthesis while it confirms it at the same time: "there is no sense, only senseless love, senseless death. Whoever echoes these reflections [...] forswear me when I shall forswear myself, deny myself, plunge into Her who summons, singing ... 'Love! Love! Love!'" (12, Barth's ellipsis) Recognizable are both the existential concern of the swimmer and the playful, ironic, comic tone of the narrator, the latter of whom, though both are one, appears to win out at the end, thus creating the postmodern paradox of deferred meanings suggesting that something is meaningful only if it is playfully open for other (also existential) meanings. This paradoxical turn is confirmed by the ironic narrator-narrated relationship, just as in Hawkes's *Travesty*. The narrator going to his "death", to be swallowed up by the egg cell, is again simultaneously a victim and the narrator of his own victimization, which he could not possibly tell

if he had “died” in the fusion with “Her”. Both Hawkes’s and Barth’s narratives demonstrate how the opposition of discourses, the discourse of fictional actuality and the counter-discourse of possibility and of speculation can be made the compositional principle not only of the narrated situation but also of the recounting situation of the narrator as well. We will return to concept and use of the paradox in a comparison of modernism and postmodernism in the next section.

#### **4.8. Aesthetics in a Nutshell: The Modern and the Postmodern Paradox**

The postmodern paradox emerges out of the interaction of the deconstructive and reconstructive *forces* of aesthetics. The paradox is their common form. This is the reason why Barth considers it so important for postmodern fiction. “[I]t does real work, accomplishes real things in the real world” — and in narrative by qualifying the otherwise “too simplistically optimistic, doctrinaire, ideological, or whatever” (Ziegler and Bigsby 22). For Hawkes, as mentioned, the paradox is the “significant shape” of the novel: “The terrifying similarity between the unconscious desires of the solitary man and the disruptive needs of the visible world” take best “the shape of [a] meaningful psychic paradox” (1962, 787). We can here refer back to what was said earlier about the link between the postmodern writers and the pre-Socratic, pre-metaphysical Greek philosophers. Both have a penchant for the paradox, though each group employs it for their respective purposes. The structure of the paradox is such that the discrepancies immanent to its form cannot be solved by logic, though they still may contain a truth of their own, a non-logical truth (see Geyer and Hagenbüchle); they undermine Aristotelian logic, according to which any contradiction would make a statement valueless. The paradox marks that which is excluded from rational thinking and cultural norms; and since literature is supposed to be subversive in its methods and goals, literary theorists from the Romantics and the New Critics to the deconstructionists have stated that, in Cleanth Brooks’s words, “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (1947, 3). The universal traits of the paradox and its function, however, are varied by historical features. Paradoxical statements, be they rhetorical paradoxes, logical

antinomies, or paradoxes of “life”, define themselves, as all forms of thought do, by their function and evaluation in historical, personal, and literary contexts.

In modernism, the paradox transforms disjunction into an artistically perfected shape that appears as the model of significant or organic form. Thus Cleanth Brooks defines it in terms of oneness, fusion, and synthesis. It is “a device for contrasting the conventional views of a situation, or the limited and special view of it such as those taken in practical and scientific discourse, with a more inclusive view” (1947, 257; see also 1974). As a result the modern paradox is “the assertion of the union of opposites” (213), of the fusion of “conflicting elements in a harmonious whole” (1939, 37). Ignoring the workings of time, of deconstruction and confusion, such a paradox creates a static, assured, and settled structure of formal symmetry. Brooks’s harmonizing optimism, his belief in the power of organic form to come to a resolution that masters force and the energetics of disorder and complexity, have evoked objection, especially, in Murray Krieger’s words, against the harmonious resolution of the “unchecked multiplication of complexities, hell-bent for chaos” (135). Confusion, uncertainty, contingency, in short chaos, allegedly checked by organic form in modernism, is now loose in the complexities of postmodern fiction.<sup>42</sup>

The postmodern paradox is *not* what Brooks calls a (formal) “device” of inclusion, of connecting opposites, mediating between practical/scientific surface views and essentialistic depth views in an organic form that contains and puts to rest the internal pressures from incongruities and destructive elements. While high modernist literature focuses on splits between subject and object or within the self, and while the modern paradox is contained in form, held together by the belief that contradictions can be resolved, postmodern fiction goes beyond the split, opens and covers and again opens the void, the gap, and nothingness, in a continuous movement to and fro; its paradox cannot be harmonized by ordering form. It acknowledges deconstructive force on its own terms and the indissoluble contradiction of form and force, as well as the need to reconstruct the world. The postmodern paradox places the impossible within the possible, interconnects that which is *not* connectable, superimposes perspectives that are *not* compatible. It both divides and fuses the seemingly forever separate: exhaustion-replenishment, presence-

absence, the familiar-the “other”, the ordinary-the extraordinary, and actuality-possibility, i.e., the regulatory antitheses that used to structure narrative as opposites. Their borderlines are now blurred within an order that deregulates order, a form that highlights force, disorder, chaos and the void. But postmodern paradoxical thinking is not only an epistemological venture, the new truth of rejecting truth, the sense that includes nonsense, the irrational exploding the rational. It also includes the *ethical* contradictions at the extreme point of human behavior, a point at which all humanistic values are negated, i.e., in the grotesque. The grotesque stance is marked by a double-coded paradox, a combination of a logical contradiction — that rational human beings are irrational — which generates the ridiculous, and the ethical contradiction — that humans are inhuman — which gives rise to the ghastly and horrifying. The contrast between the logical and ethical contradictions is such that it creates, in addition to the logical and ethical paradoxes, a third one, namely the unbridgeable contradiction between two attitudes and modes of writing, the comic (resulting from the rational-irrational opposition) and the horrifying (the outcome of the contrast human-inhuman). All three together form the grotesque stance.

The poles of the postmodern paradox cannot be negotiated because it is the paradox of life, of *life's experience* with all its irrationalities and gaps, transferred into narrative. Coover says that “the writer’s experience is paradoxical. Like life itself [...] This is partly what accounts for the peculiar structure of contemporary fictions: they’re revealing this paradox, and in a sense imitating it, so the forms themselves are seemingly not as coherent as old-fashioned narratives” (Ziegler and Bigsby 87). All postmodern writers value the paradox highly and use it for the designation of life’s and narrative’s undeletable contradictions, the ultimate opposites of life and art, stasis and dynamis, being and moving, the determinate and the indeterminate, the articulate and the inarticulate, the finished and the unfinished, surface and void, language and gap. Hawkes remarks: “We take literal journeys, travel all over the place, but in a sense are always stationary within the self. I like the paradox of going nowhere and everywhere” (Ziegler and Bigsby 185). paradoxical opposites create an existing world in situational boundaries, and at the same time transgress these boundaries. In being placed on the edge of the

comprehensible, the postmodern paradoxical figuration posits itself at or even beyond the limit of representation.

The postmodern paradox has two facets. Frege's "temporal" paradox — that every proposition can become the object of another proposition and be changed by it in an endless chain of propositions — combines with the "spatial" absence-presence paradox. The result is on the one hand what Borges calls, in reference to Kafka, "infinite deferrals", deferrals of the opening of the void and of the confrontation with the absurd; on the other, however, it results in the continuous confirmation of their presence in absence. Peterson, in Barthelme's "A Shower of Gold" from *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, reflects: "I was wrong, Peterson thought, the world is absurd. The absurdity is punishing me for not believing in it. I affirm the absurdity. On the other hand, absurdity is itself absurd" (182). This is the absurd view of the absurd view which relates to the "tragic view of the Tragic View", postulated in Barth's *Chimera*, and to Barthelme's above-quoted angst of the "lack of angst". To survive, one has to be, like McCamish in Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, a "negator even of negations", who "surrenders to the paradox, surrender facilitated by his conviction that paradox, impossibility, confusion and emptiness are the natural abode of a mind at rest" (230). Or one is a "positive negativist", a term used in Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (200, 328). The ground-figure of these paradoxes is Beckett's "I can't go on. I'll go on". What one faces in the most extreme form of this paradox is Democritus's phrase quoted by: "*Nothing is more real than nothing*" (*Moll* 193). However, in postmodern fiction, the nothing-versus-something configuration does not produce Beckett's pessimism but rather a new positivism, at least a playful positivism of the writer, of the writer as "positive negativist". The ultimate point is finally reached where utter alienation of the self paradoxically converges with, and turns into, the liberation of consciousness through the play of the imagination, and its opening activity.

It is the *gap* between the two contrasting poles that gives the postmodern paradox its edge. It is the gap that is left unfilled between contradictory propositions and remains unbridgeable, except by "inventions of the imagination" (Foucault). In fact, the gap itself is a paradox *within* the paradox. It defines as nothingness the potential of fullness, and as fullness the threat of nothingness, and it

is therefore the source of both elemental fear and vital creativity. The gap is the subjectivist and the trans-subjectivist “ground-situation” of the paradox; it is a negative shape *in-between*, created by the circularity of all arguments and the mere virtuality of all figurations. It both stimulates and obstructs the writer; it is the site of the imaginary, where the possible meets the actual and vice versa. Coover says: “That vibrant space between the poles of the paradox: that’s where all the exciting art happens, I think” (LeClair and McCaffery 67). Sukenick is more ambivalent: “In the space between nothing is impossible. The gap. The blank space the clean slate. Where the terror is. And where dreams condense like clouds in an empty sky. Civilization comes down to a man staring at an empty page” (1975a, 171). In Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, text and protagonist seek “hopelessly to fill the void” (10), because, in the phrasing at the end of Barthelme’s “Nothing: A Preliminary Report”, “try as we may, we cannot do other than fail and fail absolutely [at the task of defining nothing] and [...] the task will remain always before us, like a meaning for our lives” (GP 165).

We are caught between two impossibilities, the impossibilities of either filling or confronting emptiness. Francisco Squalidozzi says in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “We cannot abide that *openness*: it is terror to us. Look at Borges” (364). Barth puts blanks in the text for the definition of identity (“Menelaiad”) and death (LETTERS), and by doing so even abandons the poles of the paradox, leaving only the gap, silence, which is itself a paradox, considering the need of articulation. Or, moving back and forth among creative possibilities and the limit, death, he employs Borges’s “game with shifting mirrors” (to use the subtitle from a Borgesian fictive novel, qtd. in Blüher 542), the mirrors of possibilities acting like the juxtaposed parts of the paradox which cover the terrible vacuum, the void, and still leave it open. Since, according to the Sartre of *Nausea* (1942), “we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness” (96), one has to use, in Barth’s terms, the “metonymic” or the “metaphoric” methods to represent emptiness, i.e., say what borders on it or what it is like, or, ultimately, leave the gap and finish in silence. But the result remains the same: failure. What outlasts everything else is the gap. The idea of emptiness is the hallmark in Coover’s *The Public Burning*, in which words hide terrible abysses and truths are without content, “a

hole in the spirit. The motive vacuum” (263). The Rocket at the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is defined by the gap, the in-between; it “reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre” (760). (One might think of one of Zeno’s paradoxes: “If I approach the door in units of halves, I will never arrive”.) The ultimate paradoxical opposition of postmodern fiction is the ontological antithesis of *something* and *nothing*. Both poles are ultimately fused into one, in life and in the text.

The postmodern paradox is the extreme case at the limit in that it is on the defensive, but, imploding philosophical thought, it transcends the limit by going on the offensive in an unlimiting, paradoxically open practice of thinking and narrating. The contradictions open up the singular in the general, the indeterminable in the determinate, the mobile in the immobile. By no longer being hermeneutically negotiable but only performatively suspendable, these juxtaposed opposites deny “good” or common sense and its uni-logical, predetermined direction; they introduce a *derisive* aspect into the performance. The opposites reject and deride the traditional course of consciousness, the turn from the particular to the general, from the nomadic to the sedentary (see Deleuze 1990, *passim*). This kind of paradox gains the offensive by explorative *play*. It is able to create a dynamic, energizing continuum of contradictory, mutually exclusive positions of thought and attitude because it exists only in playful terms. Combining the “temporal” and “spatial” facets of the paradox, dissemination, superimposition, and presence in absence results in a *paradoxical collage in flux* as playful identity of force and form.

The playful virtuality of the contrasting positions of the postmodern paradox, finally, makes the oppositional structure of the paradox itself only a *virtual* form. Its “virtualization” leads to its self-destruction, which is the ultimate paradox. It paradoxically attains the ability to bridge abysses by what Ihab Hassan calls “radical irony, a term I apply to any statement which contains its own ironic denial” (1982, 77). This radical irony serves the paradox, the extreme form of serious reflection and of containing the dichotomies of thought and life — paradoxically — by its self-denial fulfilling its task, namely by imagining nothingness, by containing the void. The insight into the necessity of ironizing and self-deconstructing, of aestheticizing, i.e., holding in balance all proclaimed positions of

judgment, especially the synthesizing theoretical ones, in order to keep up the fluidity of thought, provokes a sort of paradoxical self-deconstruction in philosophy as well; the means for it is a playfulness that includes the ironic and comic modes.<sup>43</sup>



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## 5. The Fantastic

### 5.1. Definitions and Contexts

The disruptive dynamic *force* of the imagination creates incongruities that we call fantastic. The latter has *no form* of its own but is defined in relation to other forms by the perspectives of negation and evaluation. The use of the term “fantastic” for the analysis of postmodern fiction has a number of advantages. Most importantly, it has its own history, or rather, the “fantastic” in fiction has its own history and invites comparisons; it is also a category of psychology and thus broadens the perspective by inviting the study of similarities and differences in its use in various disciplines. The application of the term “fantastic” to postmodern fiction is here based (1) upon the dominance of an “irrealistic” quality in postmodern narrative, (2) upon the necessity of conceptualizing this “irrealism” in relation to what might be called the fictionally “real” or, rather, the ideas of the real and the probable that function as horizon to the discourse of the fantastic, and (3) upon the fact that the category of the fantastic is employed for the epistemology and ontology of postmodern fiction by the authors themselves. Since the denomination “fantastic” is the most comprehensive category for what postmodern fiction is like, it is imperative to analyze both the conceptual scope of the term and its historical “filling” and framing in fiction before we investigate the appearance and function of the fantastic mode in postmodern narrative.

Definitions of the fantastic are mostly imprecise and contradictory. Most theorists agree that the fantastic as a category is a relational phenomenon, is tangential, “only presents itself, initially, on the edge of something else” (Cixous, qtd. in Jackson 68), and can be defined only in contrast to, or as modification of, what might be loosely called the “real”.<sup>44</sup> In Husserl’s terms, “[f]antasy is through and through modification, and it cannot contain anything other than modification”, and every modification is characterized by the fact that “in itself is contained the reference to another consciousness of which it is called modification” (Husserl 1980b, qtd. in Iser 1993, 202). This means that the fantastic has no objects of its own; it constitutes itself by modifying existing ones. Consciousness needs

the fantastic as a generative matrix to negate the given, to give presence to the non-given, the absent, to present the alternative, the other. Transformation is the hallmark of the fantastic. Critics agree that, epistemologically or ethically, the fantastic has transgressive function: it expands the idea of the real, making appearance disappear, replacing presence with absence, and superseding absence with newness.

It can be attributed to the private sector as “*protective fictions*”, psychological facades, which bar the way to memories (Freud 1966, i, 247- 48), or to the social sector, serving, for instance, satire and the grotesque. Following Freud’s remark “that fantasy [in contrast to dreams] is always progressive”, Jacqueline Rose states that it “is not [...] antagonistic to social reality”, that it in fact “sheds its private illicit nature and goes to work in the world at large” and thus should be placed “at the heart of our political vocabulary” (2-4). And in the course of the new interest of the nineties in the problems of verbal visualization as part of the interest in reader response, the fantastic can be used to delineate “the fantasmatic filling-in that fiction generates”. (Schwenger 2).

As far as the definition of the fantastic is concerned, there has not been much progress since Rein Zondergeld’s statement in 1973 “that research and theoretical discussion in this controversial area has hardly begun yet” (10, my translation).<sup>45</sup> Most attempts at defining the category of the fantastic beyond the statement that it is contrasted to the “real” have failed because of difficulties in establishing unambiguous criteria.<sup>46</sup> The most rigorous analysis of the fantastic has been undertaken by Tzvetan Todorov in his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. In the following discussion, Todorov’s much-cited definition (rather than those of Roger Caillois, Pierre Castex, and Louis Vax, which, though well-known, are less comprehensive in scope)<sup>47</sup> shall be our starting-point. For Todorov, as for Caillois, the fantastic is an irruption of the unusual, the unnatural, the causally inexplicable, into the ordered familiarity of the everyday. But Todorov was the first to attempt a systematic poetics of the fantastic in the sense that he dispenses with extra-literary categories and analyzes the literary structure of the fantastic, still using, however, a psychological approach. The fantastic for Todorov lies not so much in the actual event (which, according to his terminology, would constitute something marvelous)

as in the *reaction* of the subject experiencing the supernatural: “The fantastic [...] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation” persists between “the uncanny” where “the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described” and the marvelous where “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena” (1975, 41). Scholars who analyze the fantastic often follow this definition, but it would seem problematical in three respects. First, it restricts the fantastic to certain topics and motifs within the realm of the supernatural, on the border of which the fantastic is situated; this would exclude play with the fantastic construct, which is a decisive feature of the formation of the fantastic in postmodern fiction. Second, it reduces the fantastic to the reaction of individual subjects, their hesitation (“the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work” [33]), their vacillation between a natural and supernatural explanation of their experience *within* the text. And third, his categories are inflexible. He speaks of the “laws of reality” and “laws of nature”, while postmodern narrative is based on the blurring of the borderlines between reality and fiction.<sup>48</sup>

Due to his reduction of the fantastic to a psychological phenomenon *within* the text, Todorov is generally obliged to restrict its occurrence to the nineteenth century and also to exclude Poe (most of whose tales are placed within the “truly uncanny”). Maupassant’s short stories seem to him the last convincing examples of the fantastic genre. For Todorov, a twentieth-century representation of the supernatural such as Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” has as its distinctive feature the fact that “the most surprising thing is precisely the absence of surprise with regard of the unheard-of-event”, and that it assumes “an increasingly natural atmosphere as the story progresses” (1975, 169). Though Todorov defines the fantastic not only as a genre but also as an aesthetic category, he neglects the fact that an aesthetic category (being a formal principle) should be devoid of fixed content and defined rather as a model or open structure, as a function in the process of communication between text and reader. This openness should include the possibility that the counter-position to the fantastic, concepts of the real or of order, can be situated either in the text or in the consciousness and response of the reader. The fantastic can thus be constituted not only by the shock experienced by a figure in the text, but also (as in

Kafka) by the contrast between the reader's expectation of the fictional "real" (or order) and the unreal or chaotic representation of the world in the text. Furthermore, the fantastic need not only be primarily a limited psychological phenomenon in the text but can also be a total *ontological* estrangement that poses unanswerable epistemological questions.

In our analysis, the fantastic as category is understood in opposition to an assumed "real"; it is a category both of the experiential, extra-linguistic reality and the intratextual, linguistic world. The fantastic and the real are situated on two borderlines: between "reality" and the text, and between the text and the reader. The fantastic is thus not defined by a textual category alone (because in the text there is only the actual and the possible), but by an extratextual one, the real, which of course can be "imported" into the text as the *idea* of the real and as such made functional for the definition of the fantastic. But further differentiations appear advisable. The fantastic appears *within* the text not only as the opposite of the real, which exists in the text only as the idea of the real anyway, but as the disruptive force that denies the category of order in order to develop its own order, which includes disorder, chaos. This new form is, as we argued above, the paradox. From the viewpoint of the *reader*, the fantastic is experienced both intratextually as disorder, and extratextually as the suspension of the expected, the "natural" and the "real", the familiar and common-sensical.<sup>49</sup> The postmodern *author* (and possibly the reader) might see the fantastic along with Philip Roth as the ingredient of the socially and culturally real that is reflected in the text: "[T]he American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist" (144).<sup>50</sup> This cultural scene is characterized by an exhaustion of the objectivity and subjectivity espoused by nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists respectively as totalizing frames of reference, and by the abandonment of those norms and principles that once lent coherence to the by now disparate social, economic, and cultural realms. These shifts in vision and technique (frequently revealing the shaping influence of

such movements as surrealism and of such writers as Kafka and Borges) form the basis of what one may call the new creative *totalizing* fantastic, which, as we argued before, does not exhaust itself in negation but turns negation against itself in order to gain new space for the imagination and its inexhaustible potential for creating possible worlds.

Setting disorder against order, the totalizing fantastic has at least three functions: in regard to the world, it creates the force of defamiliarization; in regard to the self, it enforces a sense of alienation; and in regard to the imagination, it generates a liberation from the dead matter of tradition and convention. The first and the second functions are psychological in a narrower sense. The totalizing fantastic mode thus comprises the psychological (and the social/satiric) fantastic in spite of the fact that postmodern fiction is anti-psychological and anti-Freudian. It is helpful at this point to refer to psychological and psychoanalytical theories because they have theorized the fantastic and put it on the map as an independent category. In fact, Freud's displacement theory and the theories of psychosis developed by Lacan and Laing can help to give the fantastic in the text a general basis in human experience which the reader might also share. Being the correction of a schema, of order, and the real, the fantastic in fiction does what it has always done: it manifests that which has been excluded from rational knowledge, displaced by the ego, and tabooed by society. In the description of this displacement mechanism, literature and psychology — or, more accurately, psychoanalysis — find a common field of interest.

Freud used the term "fantastic" to mark that threshold beyond which — in life as in literature — the world of reason and science is abandoned for irrational spheres. He saw "the laws of the unconscious embodied" (1968c, 121) in fantastic literature, and found in the "correspondence" between literature and theory a "proof" for the "accuracy" of the latter (1968a II, 3, 101). Freud's interpretations of E.T.A Hoffmann's "The Sandman" and W. Jensen's "Gradiva"<sup>51</sup> show that he transferred the method of dream interpretation to literature, ignoring the intricate unity of the work of art and reading the latter instead as a rebus that does not follow the laws of its own structure but those of hieroglyphs that must be deciphered and put into a meaningful order revealing the mechanism of displacement. The theory of psychosis follows Freud's path but no

longer speaks of “embodiments” of the laws of the unconscious in fantastic literature so emphasized by Freud; instead, a “hermeneutically understandable context of meaning” is constructed by employing the fantastic as a model of psychosis (Habermas 1968, 331). Ronald D. Laing (1965), citing texts by Blake, Hölderlin, Keats, Strindberg, Kafka, and Yeats, has made the fantastic a part of this (psychological) terminology and has thus introduced the notion of the fantastic into the theory of psychosis. The fantastic is thus defined as a state of mind where the sense of control over reality is dissolved and replaced by illusions, phantoms, and hallucinations. The connection between the fantastic in literature and in psychological theory, traceable to the beginning of psychoanalysis, is thus firmly established.

But there is also disagreement among theorists of psychosis about the significance of the basic configuration of psychic disruption, as J. Metzner has shown.<sup>52</sup> Lacan, for instance, has placed the “subversion of the cogito” at the center of psychoanalysis (Metzner 92). Since, according to Lacan, the human organism in the neo-natal months feels a primordial discord and uncoordination (1977, 4), which are only overcome by fantasies of totality through the subject’s perceiving of such external totality (in the mirror stage) and subsequently internalizing this totality, psychotic collapse is no less than the moment of truth, the restoration of the original state of disruption that had been transformed into an illusion of wholeness and identity only by an act of self-deception. Hence, the perception of wholeness in the other, leading to the subject’s misunderstanding of himself or herself as a totality, and the collapse of the self, are caused not merely by a disintegration of the structure of the self, but by a complex pattern of interaction and breakdown. Laing has generalized this concept of the constitution and threatening of the self by the other and has taken it to be something permanent that persists far beyond the stage of socialization. The self is for Laing the sum of the experiences that one thinks others have undergone in relation to oneself. It is thus a product of fantasy and can easily be shattered by a loss of social contact. The self then becomes fantastic because the “system of social fantasy” is no longer intact (1965, 111). Since Lacan and Laing, this postmodern inter-actionistic understanding of psychosis has been dominant. It is obvious that in this view “normality” and the shattering of “normality” are equally “fantastic”,

thus preparing the ground for the dominance of the fantastic in postmodern fiction (and already in some “modern” texts, such as those of Kafka).

The introduction of phenomenological methods has further elaborated the interpretation of this mechanism of psychic disruption. Binswanger has suggested that we speak instead of the return of the displaced, of the “sudden irruption of the new into experience” (425, and Gabel) and has adopted this alternative understanding of psychosis to establish a sociopathological theory, holding that it is a deficient experience of reality caused by society that is responsible for the collapse of the ego. The breach in Lacan’s system of interaction becomes for Gabel a matter of alienation originating in the mechanization, functionalization, and reification of human interrelationships and social conditions in general. It leads to the loss of flexibility and of dialectical thinking, so that the subject can only experience the dialectic of the real as a threat and, in extreme cases, as a “rent” in his or her picture of the world, which causes a disruption of the self and a fantasizing of the perception of the world. While Freud, Lacan, Laing and Gabel see the disruptions of psychosis occurring as the result of a lack of equilibrium, of interaction or contact with reality, and thus diagnose it as something abnormal, one can turn the tables and postulate, as David Cooper has done, that in psychosis reality is experienced as a threat not because the subject has a wrong perception of it, but because he or she has the right, actually the “normal” idea, and that reality is indeed a threat. One can see how this perception of psychosis accords with the nature of the fantastic in Kafka and partly in postmodern literature, where the fantastic becomes an all-encompassing feature of the textual strategies.

The various interpretations of psychosis listed here demonstrate a number of important points. (1) There is not only one psychological or psychoanalytical understanding of psychosis and hence of the fantastic as deviation or correction in literature. (2) One is able to choose between the various explanations of psychosis and use them for the interpretation of the same fantastic text. (3) There are apparent affinities between certain theories of psychosis and certain forms of the fantastic. (4) A psychological or psychoanalytical explanation of the fantastic cannot contribute directly to a definition of the literary fantastic; it can serve as a tool for the



interpretation of certain yet by no means all forms of the fantastic in literature. While, for instance, Freud's psychoanalytical theory (giving the ego a humanistic, mediating role between the super-ego and the id) sees psychotic disruption as a "collapse" of the ordering ego, the literary fantastic can represent psychic catastrophe as a restoration of the order of disorder, of truth if it is understood as lying in disorder. (5) The psychological grounding of the fantastic that almost exclusively pays attention to the abnormality of the fantastic and the threat it poses to the person is obviously not sufficient for an understanding of the fantastic in narrative, where it has its own literary function as an *aesthetic* phenomenon based on *anthropological* verities. It gives scope to an outflow of the imagination; it serves a liberation from the narratives of reality and from exhausted conventions. It is thus a tool for the workings of freedom, for the free construction of possible, alternative worlds, a means of guaranteeing the autonomy of art in the limit case, at "the end of the road", to quote the title of Barth's novel.

As force the fantastic produces disorder, which takes the shape of incongruities. The incongruities of "irrealism" can be moderate or radical deviations from order and the idea of the real, and various types of the fantastic can be distinguished according to the tension that is built up in the text and maintained between (the idea of) the "real" and the unreal or between order and disorder. Since *incongruities* are also the basis of other perspectives of negation, of the comic and the parodic, of satire and the grotesque, they can use and form the fantastic. The fantastic in these cases serves the modes of evaluation, which then further perspectivize the fantastic in terms of the dialectic between order and disorder, the good and the bad. The fantastic is linked with *chaos* and *abstraction* because both are manifestations of negation, negation of the commonsensical real. Chaos and abstraction will be used here, together with *negation* of order in general, for an analysis of the fantastic as an aesthetic phenomenon, of what Barth calls (post-modern) "irrealism" (*LF* 112). We will first examine the aesthetic modes of the fantastic and then the role of chaos, abstraction and the void for the constitution and function of the fantastic in the postmodern text.

## 5.2. The Fantastic as Aesthetic Mode

The fantastic deviation from a norm and the fantastic creation of incongruities are subject to an evaluating perspective that gives it sense and determines its scope and radicality. Accordingly the fantastic ranges (1) from the world created by willing suspension of disbelief in the fairy-tale, through (2) the depiction of the “abnormal” side of the human soul, to the (3) satirically and grotesquely fantastic that is directed aggressively outwards, exposing through extreme deformations of the narrative surface the deformations of society; to what is called (4) “magic realism”, with its programmatic fusion of the fantastic and the real, and (5) the hermetically fantastic world that questions and, as it were, engulfs the idea of the real and of order, not differentiating between reality and fiction. It is important to note that postmodern fiction makes use not only of type five but also employs and transforms types one to three, while there are obviously problems in relating magic realism to postmodern fiction, as we will see later.

(1) On the level of selection and combination, the fantastic may merely be the extension of the finite, an expansion or manipulation of space and time, a connection of sudden and surprising events, a grouping of episodes generating terror, an enumeration of hyperboles of riches and power, poverty and oppression. The “natural” and the “artificial” are not contrasted here. A world is created that stretches and even outdoes the real without rebelling against its standards of behavior and value-judgments. The ordinary is heightened by the imagination, which can receive its own consecration in the distant and timeless land of the Fairy Queen. This type of the non-aggressive, often neither satirically outer-directed nor psychologically inner-directed fantastic is found in the fairy-tale, in certain kinds of fantastic adventure stories, or in such collections as *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is an early, “totalizing” type of the fantastic, which, however, persists in popular fantastic fiction — the novels of H. P. Lovecraft, for instance — and in its transformation into science fiction in the twentieth century. The existential “rent” between two dimensions of the fictional world and the split in the soul are not thematized in this variety of the fantastic, though the uncanny may appear in all forms of hesitation, anxiety and fear. But ultimately the sense of the real (of order), if it ever has been shaken

by the uncanny, can easily be reestablished. And the same is true of goodness, truth, nobility and social order, which need no definition but are decreed authoritatively and confidently from the belief in an ultimately benevolent universe. Sartre who sees in the fantastic a perennial form manifesting itself in historical shape, refers this kind of the fantastic to a metaphysical horizon, saying that as long as religious belief had been operative, fantasy opened other realms and fulfilled a compensatory, escapist function: "It manifested our human power to transcend the human. Men strove to create a world that was not of this world" (1965, 55). In a secularized universe, fantasy does not point to the supernatural but presents something strange, something "other", in which definite meanings are not possible.

Employing a method of superimposition, postmodern narrative uses the fairy-tale fantastic mode for the double coding of the created world, for creating its ontological multi-valence. Postmodern Fiction entertains two possibilities of employing the fairy-tale for its purposes. First, it starts out with an existent fairy-tale and changes it, fantasizing, as it were, once more that which is already fantastic. The model case is Barthelme's *Snow White*. He says in an interview, "the usefulness of the Snow White story is that everybody knows it and it can be played against [...] Every small change in the story is momentous when everybody knows the story backward; possibly I wasn't as bold in making these changes as I should have been" (LeClair and McCaffery 42-43). Another, perhaps even more radical example is Coover's *Briar Rose*, a poetic recreation of the Sleeping Beauty story with a set of intricate variations on the old fairy tale. The book tells of a prince trapped in the briars, of a sleeping beauty who cannot awaken and of dreams of a succession of kissing princes, and an old fairy who inhabits the princess's dreams and tries to please her with legends of other sleeping beauties. The artistic principles according to which the text is composed are the postmodern paradigms of appearance vs. disappearance, singularity vs. plurality, narration vs. reflection, the result being a kind of "may-be" style of (possibility) narration/thinking, which transforms its basis, the fixed formula of the fairy tale. The briars that hold the prince captive disappear and reappear. So do the princes who kiss the princess, and the children who appear to belong to her but then disappear and reappear. the central characters and the pivotal situations are multiplied, repeated,

and varied: the prince in the briars, the princess sleeping and dreaming, the sleeping beauty, and the prince who tries to kiss her awake. The aim is the typical postmodern double or rather multiple coding, the aestheticization of that which already has been aestheticized, the fantastication of that which already has been fantasticized. The result of this procedure is the multiplication and overlay of uncertainties, the transformation of the simple uncertainties of the fairy-tale formula into existential, epistemological, and ontological uncertainties, with “the longing for integrity [...] itself fragmented”, “with a castle where “[s]ometimes there are walls, doors, ceilings, sometimes not”, with self-reflexive questions about the self: “Who am I? She wants to know”; or about the status of the heroic quest: “Which is? Honor. Knowledge. The exercise of his magical powers. Also love of course”, “the love of love”. Further questions are asked about motivation: “he wishes he could remember more about who or what set him off on this adventure,[...] which is probably not even ‘his’ at all, but rather a something out there in the world beyond this brambly arena into which he has been absorbed”; or simply about “what is ‘whole?’” or about “the dreadful void”. The prince finally realizes (the text alluding to and rejecting or expanding Wittgenstein’s famous opening statement in his *Tractatus*, “The world is all that is the case”): “There is a door that is not a door. That is where it all begins. He knows that nothing at this castle is simply what it is, everything has a double life” (*BR* 2, 6, 4, 67, 12, 15, 3, 45, 69). The strategy is to fill out the “holes”, the possibilities left unused in the old tales, which Coover also does in “The Gingerbread House” (Hänsel and Gretel). Barth also uses this method of reworking old legends in *Chimera* or in the stories from *The 1001 Tales in Chimera*, and in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, a recast of the Sinbad story.

The second method of employing the fairy-tale formula is to make use of the transformational possibilities that lie in the current socio-cultural system. The latter, as it were, creates its own quasi-fairy-tale world. Both cases, however, have something in common: the mixture of the fairy-tale world and a current world of quite different status, and the attempt to draw advantages from this tension for the composition and the “theme” of the book. The result is an overlay of worlds, whether the direction runs from the fairy-tale to

the current world, or from a current world to a fantastic fairy-tale-like one. The strategy of transformation is play, and play is the loosener of borderlines and rigid form; the playful process is a continuous movement to and fro. In fact, in the fantastic mode “play always plays with what has been achieved by playing” (Iser 1993, 265). In the second case, the writer gives the created world traits of the fairy-tale or the mythic story (which takes on features of the fairy-tale by being played with). Playing with the features of the fairy/mythic tale, however, does not prevent their matrices from being used as organizational forms. Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* and *Chimera* are pertinent examples of how to build a plot on mythic/fairy-tale schemata that organize patterns of initiation, of maturing, succeeding, and failing. And so is, in quite another way, Coover’s *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.*

Coover’s novel starts out with the current world of everyday life, which then turns into an imaginary world of obsession; the world of obsession separates itself in a final stage from its originator and, so to speak, floats away in space and time. The protagonist, Henry Waugh, becomes fanatically obsessed with a table-top baseball game that he has rigged up with an elaborate system of dice and charts (the system, not the originator of the game, actually deciding what happens in the ball games). He is finally so passionately involved with the imaginary players (who take on their own personalities) and the events that happen to them that he comes to believe in their literal existence. The Universal Baseball Association finally creates a self-reliant imaginary counter-universe with its own sense of beauty, order, balance, and mythic attributes. It develops its own status as a new dimension of the actual with impressive power and extensive demands on its creator: “Odd thing about an operation like this league: once you set it in motion, you were yourself somehow launched into the same orbit” (*UBA* 142). At the end, by his interventions, which are against the rules, Henry “was destroying the Association [...] it was strangely as though they [the players] were running from him, afraid of his plan, seeing it for what it was: the stupid mania of a sentimental old fool” (176).

In the last fantastic chapter Coover frees the Association from its creator, one hundred baseball seasons after the last events. A “welter of myths, religious allusions, bits of folklore, allegories of the Old and the New Testaments, metaphysical speculations, and so

on” (McCaffery *Metafictional Muse* 1982, 55) form the new world of the Association that replays on Damonsday a combination of the old games in which Damon and Casey were killed. The relationship to the present of the text is established by the fact that the players repeat the problems of the current world. Their attempts to disclose the meaning behind their activities are thwarted by the contradictions and ambiguities of the signs available to them. They only lead to “the final emptiness” (*UBA* 239), which, however (in the manner of fairy-tales), is overcome at the end by the realization that “the game” (just like the game of life) is “not a trial” or “a lesson”: “It’s just what is” (58; cf. Wittgenstein’s “The world is all there is”). According to Coover, the role of the artist is to become “the mythologizer, to be the creative spark in this process of renewal: he’s the one who tears apart the old story, speaks the unspeakable, makes the ground shake, then shuffles the bits back together into a new story” (Wolff 54). *The Universal Baseball Association*, Coover’s *Briar Rose*, and Barthelme’s *Snow White*, confirm, though in different ways, the fact that the postmodern totalizing, but de-unifying, fantastic, the liberating fantastic of the imagination, accommodates the psychological fantastic as a foundational component, though it is anti-psychological and anti-Freudian. Postmodern fiction often even extends the psychological basis of the fantastic to the (modernist) split self, with which our next section will deal. This is true even if psychology is played with, as it is in all three novels mentioned.

(2) The fantastic may concentrate on the narrated characters and, in extreme cases, split them in two: i.e., juxtapose an “abnormal”, unconscious, deeply disturbing, and hidden part of the soul against the “normal”, rational, everyday kind of social life the protagonist leads, and also against a surface consciousness defined by the well-mapped-out, predictable, and fact-oriented aspects of life. Todorov’s fantastic (a person’s “hesitation” between natural and supernatural explanations of a disturbing event) is a concentration of such a character-split into a moment of reaction to something that happens to a character, generally from outside. However, this character-split can also be marked by the fantastic as being something constitutive of a “sensitive”, “artistic” or diseased, even a “normal” person, and thus it may be a means of extending the fictional psychology of character by a view in depth. The Romantic fantastic of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Nachtstücke*, of some of Poe’s tales,

and Henry James's ghost stories is of this kind. This type of the fantastic depicts a state of insecurity, even alienation, and at the same time a "rent" in the accustomed order, the "rupture de l'ordre reconnu", an "irruption de l'inadmissible", which for Caillois defines the fantastic (1965, 161). Fundamental disorientation through the fantastic complexity of the world and a conflict within consciousness of the self can lead in extreme cases to the subjective deformation or suspension of the cognitive categories of space, time, and causality, thence to an existential threat to the narrated character's ego, and in extreme cases to insanity. Writing about the uncanny, with reference to E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman", Freud associates the fantastic, the "unfamiliar", with the concealed desire of which it is a projection: "to make it uncanny [...] it is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old — established in the mind and become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (1953, 218). Here the fantastic and the hallucinatory meet, and both are brought into relationship with neurosis, paranoia, and madness. Dostoevsky, in whom Bakhtin attests a plurality of discourses, a confrontation of ideologies, dissolution, dialogism and polyphony,<sup>53</sup> writes:

But you know that if there is no soil and if there is no action possible, the striving spirit will precisely express itself in abnormal and irregular manifestations — it will mistake the phrase for life, it will pounce upon the ready but alien formula, it will be only too glad to have it, and will substitute it for reality! In a fantastic life all functions, too, are fantastic (qtd. in Linner 55).

Up to (and partly including) the postmodern novel, this psychological function has been an important aspect of the fantastic — the latter working at and transgressing the boundary line between normality and abnormality, adaptation and alienation, entropy and paranoia, between the mentally "healthy" and the mentally ill or deranged (see, for instance, Gaddis, *The Recognitions*; Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Crying of Lot 49*; Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association*, *The Public Burning*, *Briar Rose*; Gass, *Omensetter's Luck*, *The Tunnel*; Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*; Elkin, *The Dick-Gibson Show*, *The Franchiser*). In aesthetic modernism, the state of extraordinary sensitivity is generally seen as an advantage because it creates an increased

awareness, and awareness creates identity. But in the postmodern novel nobody knows if awareness is an advantage, if there is anything, a truth or one's identity, of which one can or should be aware. This makes the sensitive character ironizable and potentially comic; at least it can appear under multiple perspectives. In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* fantasy is the sign of sensitivity and imagination, and it seems to be a great good. When Oedipa visits her psychoanalyst for help against what she calls paranoia and tells him "I came [...] hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy" [that there is a counter communication system called Tristero], he cries "fiercely", "Cherish it [...] What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be" (103). Yet also here the multiple perspective reigns. He may be and probably is right in the book's terms, but he himself is becoming crazy, has a shoot-out with the police who try to arrest him, and Oedipa herself is paranoid and almost crazy and definitely exhausted and unhappy at the end.

(3) The fantastic may be part and means of an ethical evaluation of the fictional world. Making visible the invisible in society and culture, it serves an additional perspective like the satiric or the grotesque and the absurd, which in this case are superimposed upon the fantastic deformations of the given. All three perspectives mentioned, the satiric, the grotesque, and the absurd, indeed require a fantastic deformation of the world in order to function. Northrop Frye sees the world as becoming the more fantastic and "absurd" the more the image of "reality" is dominated by a satiric perspective; for the satiric world-view requires "at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque" (which in Frye's somewhat vague terminology appears to mean "deformed" [224]). We will return to the perspectives of negativity in the last chapter of the book.

(4) The fantastic is directly coupled with the *real*, or, rather, it implodes the real; it defines itself in relation to an extra-textual concept of the "real", with which it blends. The problems that arise in this case are demonstrated by what has been called "*magic realism*". The notion of "*magic realism*" is oxymoronic in that it combines two different representational codes or discursive systems: an inner-



linguistic one and extra-linguistic one. They battle with and neutralize each other, in fact create perspectives of the world that are incompatible, neither of them gaining the upper hand, each remaining suspended, in disjunction with the other, and thus avoiding interpretative closure but suffering the loss of clarity. The lack of clarity, but also the questions about origin, function, and aim of magic realism, provide reasons for a controversial debate. Magic realism is considered an outgrowth of French surrealism, or the native form of Latin American realism,<sup>54</sup> and lately the signum of post-colonial emancipation in general, including the literatures of the New English languages. Yet despite its contradictions, the concept of “magic realism” retains a “strange seductiveness” (Jameson 1986, 302), and is, according to John Updike, “a now widely available elixir” (113), probably not in spite of, but rather because of, the paradoxical relation of its two poles, paradox being the hallmark of the New Fiction. The forms and aims of magic realism put it in relation to postmodern fiction and at the same time contrast it to postmodern epistemology and deconstructionist language-theory. The similarity of magic realism and postmodern fiction lies in the high valorization of the imagination and the imaginary; the contrast between the two is based upon magic realism’s interpretation of its attitude, aim, and style in terms of realism, while postmodern fiction argues in terms of irrealism, of possibility narration. Yet this does not prevent magic-realist writers from having a great influence on the postmodern American authors.

The most important difference in the conceptualization of magic realism emerges from the understanding of the two terms, “magic” and “realism”. One may understand, as Leal does, the magic part of magic realism in universal terms, as a sign of opposition against the hegemonic paradigms of the Enlightenment and the aligned schools of realism which affirm rational models; and/or one may territorialize it in its homelands, in Latin America.<sup>55</sup> Magic realism has been considered the appropriate style of the Latin American novelists because, in García Márquez’s words, Latin America is “that boundless realm of haunted men and historic women”; an “outsized reality”, it “nourishes a source of insatiable creativity”, which is more apt than the “rational talents” in Europe to represent the Continent’s magic realities, its stunning geography, racially mixed population, violent politics, etc. (88, 89). García

Márquez says that he “was able to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simply by looking at reality, our reality, without the limitations which rationalists as Stalinists through the ages have tried to impose on it to make it easier for them to understand” (*Fragrance*, 59-60). Magic realism — and this is an important difference from postmodern American fiction — thus circumvents the inevitable problems of representation and signification that the North Americans spend so much time to reflect upon and to interpret in their forms of the imaginary.<sup>56</sup>

Yet John Barth writes in his essay “The Literature of Replenishment”: “I myself will not join any literary club that doesn’t include the expatriate Colombian Gabriel García Márquez” (1984, 195), whose *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he considers “as impressive a novel as has been written so far in the second half of our century and one of the splendid specimens of that splendid genre from any century. Here the synthesis of straightforwardness and artifice, realism and magic and myth, political passion and nonpolitical artistry, characterization and caricature, humor and terror are so remarkably sustained that one recognizes with exhilaration [...] that one is in the presence of a masterpiece not only artistically admirable, but humanly wise, lovable, literally marvelous” (1984, 204). Why Barth values Márquez so highly becomes clear in his finishing remark: Márquez is “an exemplary postmodernist and a master of the storyteller’s art” (1984, 205). The “storyteller’s art” and the range of the imagination are the key characteristics that make Márquez a postmodern writer for Barth, but Barth also mentions the “synthesis of [...] realism and magic and myth”, i.e., a fusion of alternatives and contrarities that also include — and this is significant all postmodern writers — the “real”, and in fact *are* the “real”. They are, or serve the “real” because they search, in Lyotard’s words, “for new presentations [...] in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (1984a, 81).

But Barth is not the only postmodern American author who was influenced by Márquez and other Latin American writers. In an interview with Barthelme, McCaffery quotes Federman as saying “that while Samuel Beckett had devised a means of taking the world away from the contemporary writer, Márquez had shown writers a way to reconnect themselves with the world”. Barthelme disagrees “with Ray that that’s what Beckett has done; the Márquez portion of

the comment seems more appropriate. I think they've both opened things up, in different ways. Márquez provided an answer to the question of what was possible after Beckett — not the only answer, but a large and significant one. Robert Coover, among American writers, seems to be doing something parallel, to good effect" (LeClair and McCaffery 43-44). Coover himself notes that "[m]aybe I think that all my fiction is realistic", though the book's "design is born of, well, something else", namely "[t]hat vibrant space between the poles of a paradox" (67). Federman connects the two terms, magic and realism, by setting them in the conditional, the if-form, which he also ascribes to Márquez: "I read Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a novel written in the conditional, even though the dominant tense in the book may not seem to be conditional. [...] There are writers today, and I would name Gabriel García Márquez as the most important, who are reinventing the world for us, showing us new possibilities, possibilities that anything can happen. These writers lie, they exaggerate, they surrealize the real; and yet somehow they captivate us, they make us believe in the world they are reinventing and make us wish we could live in that reinvented, magical world" (129, 138). What Márquez signals is

that we are going to have much more *consciousness*, much more *reflexiveness* (in the sense of thinking), much more awareness in the novel, with a lesser emphasis on the self. In this sense the novel will reconnect with the outer world, not necessarily with reality, but with history — history which is, of course, also a form of fiction, 'a dream already dreamt and destroyed,' as John Hawkes once put it. I think this is already evident in a number of recent novels, those of Márquez and other Latin American novelists, such as Cortázar, Fuentes, and others. *The Public Burning* by Coover is also a novel where the consciousness of a specific historical moment is central to the text. I suppose Barth's *Letters* is another example, quite different in approach and style, but still a more conscious than self-conscious novel (141).

Gass agrees with the judgments of his colleagues: "A great many South American writers write rings around us. Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* is a great book. I taught [Cortázar's] *Hopscotch* once. I'll never get over it. Márquez, Fuentes, Lima, Llosa ... It is always an exciting time to be a reader" (174).

The reactions of North American writers make clear that the notion of magic realism can be defined in terms of what Borges and Barth call "irrealism", with a strong accent on "realism", a realism

that, however, opens up with its *ir*realism new spheres of reality. Barth assigns to the experimental writers he likes, i.e., Borges, Beckett, Nabokov, but also Calvino, Hawkes, Gass, Barthelme, “a more or less fantastical, or as Borges would say, ‘irrealist,’ view of reality”; and predicts rightly that “this irrealism — not antirealism or unrealism, but irrealism — [...] is likely to characterize the prose fiction of the 1970s” (Bellamy 1974, 4). Other postmodern writers agree with this in-between status of fiction, its “irrealism”, for a number of reasons. Sukenick, asked about his “concern for fantasy”, answers that “there really is no difference between fantasy and realistic action. It’s completely continuous — it’s all made up” (56), and he wants to get people to recognize the nature of their fantasies. Hawkes notes in similar terms: “I have an affinity with surrealism simply because of the felt power of the dreamlike conflicts out of which I try to make narrative fiction” (104).

Yet in spite of the “strange seductiveness” of the concept of “magic realism” for the American writers, it is a model case of what happens when too many contradictions invade a term. Since the Eighties, the term magic realism has often lost its profile and is used just like the term fantastic, in a very loose sense, to denote the overwhelming presence of the imaginary in postmodern fiction. This would make the postmodern American fictionists magic realists, along with European authors such as Günther Grass, Italo Calvino, Robbe-Grillet, D. W. Thomas, Milan Kundera, Robert Pinget. Or the looseness of its sense would make magical realist literature implicitly or explicitly ex-centric to European and North American mainstream literature, and critics would instead focus on “postcolonial” literature in general (see Slemmon). This would include, in addition to the Latin American writers (e.g., Borges, Márquez, Cortázar, Fuentes, Asturo, Carpentier), the Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, writers from Nigeria and Canada, as well as ethnic writers like Toni Morrison in the US.<sup>57</sup> Not writing from an ethnic perspective, Jameson offers “the very provisional hypothesis that the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical race material in which disjunction is structurally present” (1992, 165). Theo D’Haen has suggested that “a consensus is emerging in which a hierarchical relation is established between postmodernism and magic realism, whereby the latter comes to denote a particular strain of the contemporary movement covered by the former” (194).<sup>58</sup>

The double problem with magic realism is how to define the fantastic in relation to the real and their combination in relation to postmodern fiction. Here no consensus has been achieved. On the contrary, a number of critics have become very skeptical about the term's usefulness, though the phrase "magic realism" has undoubtedly given the Latin American novel self-confidence and cultural authority. Gonzáles Echevarría writes that the term has "neither the specificity nor the theoretical foundation needed to be convincing or useful". As to the Latin American novel, it has "rarely gone beyond 'discovering' the most salient characteristics of avantgarde literature in general" (111).

### **5.3. The Postmodern Fantastic Mode: Chaos and Abstraction, the Void and the "Real"**

The prominence given to the fantastic is a salient feature of postmodern fiction. In fact the strategies of the fantastic, in Jean Kennard's words, "most of all characterize contemporary fiction [...] Indeed in the 1960s they became the rule rather than the exception" (10- 11). The fantastic mode, being in postmodern fiction the rule rather than the exception and paradoxically both dissolving and including the idea of the real, is the bearer of *force*, both of energy and a dynamic multiperspectivism that I contributed to the aesthetic attitude.<sup>59</sup> The postmodern fantastic mode, in a spirit of playful liberation, makes use of and exhausts all the possibilities that lie in the span between tradition and originality, between exhaustion and replenishment, as well as between freedom and anxiety. Epistemological doubt and ontological uncertainty are paradoxically both expressed *and* overcome by the forceful fantastic mode with its double potential of deconstruction and reconstruction, of refusing and confirming form and synthesis. The fantastic refuses the synthesis of stasis, of the "real", the "logical", the "true", yet confirms the synthesis of opposites, of dynamis, of the infinite, of change, and, most importantly, of the story which creates "spatially" a productive synthesis as simultaneity of the actual and the possible, of, in Barth's terms, "realism and magic and myth" (1984, 204), and generates "temporally", conversely, a synthesis as difference and "différance" (Derrida), as the continuing deferral of synthesis. The ultimate aim of postmodern fiction is the paradoxical synthesis of the

two, the “spatial” design of simultaneity that includes order and debris and the “temporal” deconstruction of the design in the flow of what Sukenick, Federman and others call (indeterminate) experience. This is only possible in a fantastic, dreamlike state. Barth calls *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* “both relatively fantastical or unrealistic” (Gado 132). For Sukenick the composition of fiction results from “having a fantasy”; it is an “ongoing interchange between the mind and the page” (1985, 8), which “organizes the open field of the text” (13). “In fact, the act of writing it down is part of the fantasy, that is, it’s like sleeping, is part of dreaming — the act of writing is part of the fantasy” (Bellamy 1971, 8). Dream is a metaphor for the possibility of the synthesis that cannot be a synthesis in the actuality of the text, or at the most can be a synthesis of incompatible contrarities that both fill and fail to fill the gap, cover and fail to cover the void, which is the ultimate formula of the postmodern paradox.<sup>60</sup>

Sartre and Borges stand for the two aspects of the fantastic — Sartre for the deconstructive dimension and Borges for the reconstructive one, or at least mostly so. Sartre, referring to Maurice Blanchot’s Kafkaesque *Arminadab*, outlines the decomposing, enclosing, and depleting (modern) function of the fantastic (which forms the background to the postmodern exultant fantastic mode). Being concerned with the idea of (existentialist) meaning, he finds a lack of it in the fantastic mode. The fantastic renders the image of the universe as a universe of empty utterances, of means without ends. Suggesting a modernist, Kafkaesque world of alienation, Sartre notes: “The law of the fantastic condemns it to encounter embodiments only. These instruments are not [...] meant to serve men, but rather to manifest unremittingly an evasive, preposterous finality”. “Labyrinths of corridors, doors and stairs that lead to nothing, the signposts that lead to nothing, the innumerable signs that line the road and mean nothing. In the ‘topsy-turvy’ world, the means is isolated and posed for its own sake” (Sartre 1965, 66).

Borges, on the other hand, emphasizes the reconstructive, creative side of the fantastic, the postmodern free play of possibilities, the opening quality of the fantastic, which unlocks closed systems, without, however, excluding anxiety and “an impersonal, almost anonymous sadness” (*Fic* 141). He has remarked that at least one of four elements must be present in a narrative to be

considered fantastic: continuation of reality by dream (see the above-quoted remark of Hawkes), a work of art within a work of art, travel in time rather than in space and the presence of a doppelgänger (Rodriguez Monégál 406). These elements help define the self not as a unique, whole and closed entity that aims at stabilizing meaning but as a multiple, flexible being that is always open to the other and defines itself in terms of possibility. For Borges — and this is crucial for the postmodern attitude — thinking, dreaming, and material reality are equally “real”. He said to L.S. Dembo: “I wonder why a dream or an idea should be less real than this table for example” (qtd. in Stark 38). The narrative result of such a concept of continuity and simultaneity of the real and fantastic is the definition of both the real and the narrative worlds in terms of *modalities*, of perspectives in which “the real was [only] one of the figurations of the dream” (1968, 87). This “dreamlike” quality of reality and fiction is force, dynamic movement; its form is the image of *simultaneity*, the ever-forked path or the decentered and decoded labyrinth. The Force of the imagination can manifest itself either by infinite *expansion* of the world and the way to go (or infinite circling), or by infinite *contraction* into “a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (149-50). The fantastic is then the mode of all modes, actually the basis of all other modes.

The alienating and the inspiring or “opening” functions of the fantastic mode, its ambivalence and pluri-signification, create tensions in the signification of the text, and these tensions generate a “dramatic” potential of contrasting figurations, border crossings, and liminal disruptions. Jameson writes that the fantastic presents “an object world forever suspended on the point of meaning, forever disposed to receive a revelation, whether of evil or of grace, that never takes place” (1975b, 146). Contradicting the fixed idea of reality and order, transgressing into alien territory, and exploring the limits of desire, the fantastic does at least three things: (1) it includes chaos into order; (2) it abstracts from the concrete situation and from one-dimensional logic; (3) it faces the void and the gap.

(1) The fantastic interrelates order and *chaos*, and sets defiant disorder against the closed systems of tradition and convention. It creates indeterminacy, even non-signification, a disjunction of the stable relation between word and meaning. While modernist texts devise autonomous, self-sustaining, formally

organized wholes that use chaos only as basic material on which they impose aesthetic form, postmodern writers emancipate disorder and chaos, have no hesitation to recognize, submit to, and make use of chaos on its own terms. They accept chaos as a social or universal given. With Camus, the absurd universe is dominated by “chaos”, “chance”, and “equivalence” (54). In Borges’s “The Library of Babel”, where the universe is pictured as a library, the narrator speaks in a resigned tone of “the formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books” (*Lab* 53). Yossarian, the protagonist of Heller’s *Catch 22*, sees himself confronted by a grotesque world. It is “working in chaos in which everything was in proper order” (111). The writer Jack Gibbs says in William Gaddis’s novel *JR*: “Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos” (20). In Pynchon’s story “Entropy” the apartment of Callisto and Aubade is a futile and sterile attempt at (entropic) order that fails because chaos finally breaks in from outside: “Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city’s chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather of national politics, of any civil disorder” (79). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* Slothrop wonders, thinking of chaos, whether the sky perhaps is “where nothing is connected to anything” (434). Vonnegut notes that “there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that: It can be done” (*BC* 210). Being unsuccessful in his modernist attempts to uncover depth and find absolutes, the narrator of Max Apple’s “Vegetable Love” realizes at the beginning of a new life based on the acceptance of uncertainty and disorder that “starting from himself and stretching right to the farthest astronaut hitting a golf ball on the moon, there was a line of chaos as direct as the plumb line that went through Ferguson” (*OA* 45). In Coover’s “J’s Marriage” from *Pricksongs and Descants*, we read: “Finally, he simply gave in to it, dumped it in with the rest of life’s inscrutable absurdities, and from that time on began to improve almost daily” (117).

Chaos can be seen in positive terms, as “maximum information”, not as “an absence or a lack but as the source of all that is new in the world” (Hayles 1989, 306, see also Gleick), including a new order or a new potential of order. Chaos is the source of creativity and as such is also a “formal” category. Chaos must be



accepted or is even cherished because it allows desire and imagination the possibility and creativity of a new beginning, a new experience. Beckett writes: “there will be new form, and [...] this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else” (Driver 23). Most postmodernists would concur. Hawkes, speaking of his novels “from *The Cannibal* to *Travesty*”, notes: “in each there is a sense of closure and then a sudden suggestion of expansion toward nothingness that will once again or soon again be filled with chaos” (Ziegler and Bigsby 175). Accepting the limitations of humanity, Sukenick suggests that “chaos is easy AND USEFUL TOO” (*Up* 122). In *Snow White* Barthelme speaks of the “trash phenomenon” (97), and the “‘endless’ quality” and “‘sludge’ quality” (96), of “filling” and “stuffing” the narrated situation in the text. For Kohler in Gass’s *The Tunnel*, our minds had moved the whole arc of the dial, from [...] system to ... the chaos implicit in any complete account” (344): in fact, “chaos is an order” (452). Federman and Sukenick radicalize the case. Federman states: “I prefer discontinuity [...] I wallow in disorder, my whole existence for that matter has been a JOURNEY TO CHAOS!” (*Tol* ch. xx); and Sukenick remarks: “Reality has become a literal chaos”. “I thrive on chaos” (*DN* 47, 100). Between the two poles of chaos and (old/new) order the postmodern novel wavers in the attempt to integrate them in the “experience” (Sukenick) of author, text, and reader.

Again, science offers a frame of reference for the affirmation of chaos. Chaos and catastrophe theory propagate new paradigms of order and disorder that question the fundamental assumption of traditional philosophy and classical physics, in which a chain of causation and thus order always determines events. Instead,

[o]ur universe has a pluralistic, complex character. Structures may disappear, but also they may appear. [...] The natural contains essential elements of randomness and irreversibility. This leads to a new view of matter in which matter is no longer the passive substance described in the mechanistic world view but is associated with spontaneous activity. This change is so profound that [...] we can really speak about a new dialogue of man with nature. (Prigogine and Stengers 9)

If disorder and chaos are to be taken “seriously”, then form, too, will have to adapt itself to the new relationship between order and disorder. It is easier to translate this shift in paradigm into a work

of the visual arts than into literature. For Beuys, form is what transports the claim of “formless” matter within its form, and not what takes “formless” matter merely as a condition of possibility for the creation of form, which would then be imposed on matter as its object. He seizes matter, so to speak, in its slimy, “aboriginal” state of appearance, as felt, fat, or honey, not making them vehicles of form but bringing out their own claim to form. In literature the translation of chaos or disorder into the text is a more difficult task because of the iconic nature of language and its inherent patterns of order. In foregrounding the chaos factor in language and narrative, the way postmodern fiction does, room is made for transgressive movement on all levels. The unsayable, the non-conceptualizable, the formless, the unknown and invisible, that which we have called force, comes to the fore, in contrast to form. Fantastic deconstruction and reconstruction serves the transgression of limits. The result need not be only disruptive; it may create a new kind of balance that has — in an extension of the concept — its own kind of “beauty” (see Gass, Hawkes, and others).

(2) The introduction of chaos is complemented by a process of abstraction. Both work together under the paradigm of *disappearance* (versus appearance) in the process of deconstructing old and exhausted forms and emptying the situation of traditional fillings and orderings. “Emptying” the narrated situations of their “normal”, “plausible”, “recognizable” hierarchies, relationships, sequences, and “fillings”, reconfirms the fact that the aesthetic system is “vacant”, “abstract”, not content-oriented, but builds the stage for the organization of aesthetic worlds.<sup>61</sup> Abstraction in fact is a manner of negation, negation of accustomed notions of reality and truth that now themselves have been revealed as abstractions. It is also the negation of the (traditional) forms of the narrated situation, of its being centered in the character. It opens the situation to force, the dynamics of chaos and flow and the uncertainty of the gap and the void. In contrast to the modernist texts of, for instance, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, postmodern narrative abstraction does not only affect the character. It is “abstracted” because it comes to represent attitudes, aspects of experiencing the world. In post-modern narrative, abstraction now reaches the narrated situation itself.<sup>62</sup> Freed from the domination of plot and character, after illusion and identification have been negated or at least heavily restricted, the

abstracted situation now serves as the ground-situation of fiction, to be filled at random. Pynchon's Stencil speaks of "this abstract entity, The Situation". Since this concept of the abstract situation forms the epistemological basis of Pynchon's narrative method and that of his postmodern colleagues, it is worth quoting the passage here in full:

Stencil gritted his teeth. Oh, The Situation. The bloody Situation. In his more philosophical moments he would wonder about this abstract entity The Situation, its idea, the details of its mechanism. He remembered times when whole embassiesful of personnel had simply run amok and gibbering in the streets when confronted with a Situation which refused to make sense no matter who looked at it, or from what angle [...] He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment. Since these several minds tended to form a sum total or complex more mongrel than homogeneous, The Situation must necessarily appear to a single observer much like a diagram in four dimensions to an eye conditioned to seeing its world in only three (*V.* 173-74).

While the fourth dimension with Henry James, for instance in *The Spoils of Poynton*, is a matter of "appearance", of the integrating atmosphere of a place that speaks of the people living in it in the present or the past, it is here a matter of *disappearance* of order, and of the appearance of disorder and chaos. This disappearance affects all elements of the situations. *Time* loses its structure and is abstracted into a continuous present. Mobility and the quest signify a kind of vacuity and nothingness, an abstraction, not a goal-oriented movement. Profane, who in *V.* belongs to the Whole Sick Crew, is displaced in the streets, a rootless wanderer, who, in his own words, has learned nothing from his travels up and down the streets. They fuse into a "single abstracted street" that runs from nowhere to nowhere, offering no opportunity for projects, actions, stabilizing relationships. It is "[t]he street of the 20th Century, at whose far end or turning — we hope — is some sense of home and safety. But no guarantees [...] But a street we must walk". *Space* yields up its stability, is metamorphorsized. Things separate, do not connect. The subject-object relation does not produce coherent, "probable" images; it remains abstract, or rather abstractable, transformable at will. The *character* is abstracted into the subject, the subject into its mental capacities, finally into a mere voice (cf. Barth, "Menelaïad"). The self-reliant action is replaced by the outer, non-rationalizable,

“abstract” event. The abstraction of the situation, as the quote from *V.* implies, leads to (and is the result of) an uncertainty of epistemological, emotional, and ethical values, and personal goals; and this uncertainty affects also the meaning potential of the situation. If “no situation had any objective reality and existed only in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment”, “and if these several minds tended to form a sum total or complex more mongrel than homogeneous”, then the meaning-giving process, especially the symbolic reference, is abstracted, too. As we saw above, symbolic meaning is “aestheticized” in postmodern fiction and imposed on the vehicle, so that a tension between vehicle and tenor develops, and the relation between the two becomes arbitrary. Barth chooses as symbols for the description of the storytelling process “abstract” geometric figurations like the spiral, the circle, the Moebius strip, the labyrinth.

The *story* is abstracted, too; it just disappears from the text, erasure and abstraction being here the same thing. Federman notes that Beckett in *The Lost Ones* “went as far as you can go without story”; “he had reached the erasure of story completely. Maybe Gass or Coover or Barthelme will get to that point and also go all the way with it. But for me *The Voice in the Closet* is as far as I want to go in this direction” of story-lessness. “Many contemporary writers have wanted to go as far as we could go with this erasure, the same way that painters did when they went to the limits of abstraction” (LeClair and McCaffery 150). However, Federman notes, “Beckett went abstract and eventually won the Nobel-Prize” (151). Because the notions of reality and truth are withdrawn in postmodern fiction, in fact abstracted from the concrete worlds, the *themes* are also abstracted; it is no longer necessary to mediate them by the logic of plot or character as a psychological entity. No more is the quest for identity the thematic matrix; the abstract forces of relativity, irreality, possibility, discontinuity, indeterminacy, entropy, etc. take its place. After the character is decentered, mental capacities, perception, reflection, emotion, and desire are foregrounded in their own roles, for the most part now independent of the unity of character.

To be sure, the abstraction of the situation, of space, time, movement, and character, as well as the erasure of the logic of the story can be welcomed as a chance of liberating the imagination. Sukenick notes that “abstraction frees fiction from the

representational and the need to imitate some version of reality other than its own" (1985, 212). In fact, "[t]he mind orders reality not by imposing ideas on it but by discovering significant relations within it, as the artist abstracts and composes the elements of reality in significant integrations that are works of art" (171). Barthelme wants to abstract language to make it independent of individual consciousness: "I find myself moving toward an increasingly abstract language which has the bad effect of leaving more and more readers confused and unhappy. I greatly regret that, but I can't help it" (Ziegler and Bigsby 45). Federman generalizes this tendency: "[W]e were all at one point or another in our careers working our way toward the erasure of language" (LeClair and McCaffery 150); and Gass generalizes even further: "As an artist you are dealing with a very abstract thing when you are dealing with language (and if you don't realize that, you miss everything)" (160). The fact that the dialectic of the concrete and the abstract is without synthesis, however, causes self-doubt. Barthelme notes: "Possibly this degree of abstraction can't be done. A second possibility is that it can be done but shouldn't be done" (Ziegler and Bigsby 45).

The tendency towards abstraction obviously creates at least two problems and a new challenge. First, this abstracted situation is paradoxically always concrete. It is not abstracted from concreteness but from the ordering schemas of concreteness and must be "filled" with the elements of space, time, character, and action, at least as negatives, for language because of its iconic character is not suited for abstraction, which makes for tension between abstraction and concreteness. John Barth underlines this aspect, but differentiates between literature and art: "I believe literature's not likely ever to manage abstraction successfully, like sculpture for example. [...] Well, because wood and iron have a native appeal and first-order reality, whereas words are artificial to begin with, invented specifically to represent [...] weld iron rods into abstract patterns and you've still got iron, but arrange words into abstract patterns and you've got nonsense" (*LF* 112). Second, the loss of regulative schemas leaves the arrangement of the concrete details without pre-established form. The result of the "mongrel" status of the situation is that "the details of its mechanism" render no "sum total" (Pynchon); they in fact render all relations contingent.<sup>63</sup> But if there is no hierarchy of order left and relations are contingent, which

relations are to be chosen? Obviously those that include chaos in order, the insignificant in the significant, and those that do not impose ideas from outside but rather discover the “significant relations within it [the text]” (Sukenick). These relations originate from the dynamics of contrast and contradiction and from the emptiness of the *in-between*, the created spaces for new mediations (Beuys, Barth). They cannot unfold out of order because they embrace disorder, not as a mere contrast (since in such dualities one pole is always privileged) but as an independent force with equal rights. If one does not want to privilege the category of order, there is one way out: the relations have to be abstract, abstract however in a new way that is defined by the possible, the virtual. Abstraction here occurs both from the actual and the rational schemes of regulation.

In fact, this new abstraction battles the old abstractions, the regulative rationalizations, the exclusive categorizations, and the one-dimensional logic of traditional and modern narrative and philosophical texts, in order to attain new space for the force and multiform of new creations, for the imaginary, by abstracting from the abstraction of preformed *patterns*. This creating of new space is done by creating tension between the concrete situation and the categorizing abstract pattern, a tension that is the basis of irony, parody, or the comic mode which target the old regulative abstractions; in Coover’s words: “The abstractions are empty, aren’t they? Even so, they *are* useful. It is easier for me to express the ironies of our condition by the manipulation of Platonic forms than by imitation of the Aristotelian” (Gado 143-44). Barth says he is eager “to try to abstract the patterns” and by following it to “parody the patterns” (Bellamy 1974, 13). Imitating a pattern implies abstracting a pattern. He has many of his protagonists imitate a pattern, thus abstracting it from the lived situation that makes the traditional pattern ideological and false. He places the characters within this tension, and writes what he calls “ideological farce” (qtd. in Noland 20). As early as in *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, abstract concepts clash with concrete situations and make futile the attempts of characters to provide a canon of true ideas and rules. When the characters think and act or attempt to act according to such ideological, abstract principles of behavior, they lose their vitality, their capacity for change, for surprise and development. Contrasting situation and thought, Barth creates a life-threatening

malady with the telling and comic name of “cosmopsis”:<sup>64</sup> a paralysis of the will, which can take on different grades of intensity and is made thematic in both *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*. It makes Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor* unable “to relate to the situation”, because he cannot make up his mind, and adheres to the ideology of innocence in defiance of the demands of experience. With respect to philosophy, cosmopsis is a parodical abstraction of Camus’s absurd consciousness.<sup>65</sup> With respect to character, it is an abstraction and parody of self-reflexivity; and with respect to awareness, it is an abstraction and inversion of romantic and modern epiphany (cf. F. McConnell 132-33).<sup>66</sup> Missing in many cases is what one might call authenticity, in the sense of a “true” interaction between character, thought pattern, and situation. In the “Bellerophoniad” from *Chimera*, Zeus says to Polyeidus: “By imitating perfectly the Pattern [i.e. the sequence of situations] of Mythic Heroism, your man Bellerophon has become a perfect imitation of a mythic hero” (*Ch* 308), i.e. of the mythic pattern. Concomitantly, the friend of the spermatozoon, the narrator/protagonist in “Night-Sea Journey”, could only describe “[t]he ‘purpose’ of the night-sea journey [...] in [imitative] abstractions: *consummation, transfiguration, union of contraries, transcension of categories*” (*LF* 10). The loss of subjectivity leads to the loss of the subject, and the loss of the subject leads to extreme forms of abstraction. For Menelaus in Barth’s “Menelaiad”, the result of his confusion about love and identity is that “[p]lace and time, doer, done-to have lost their sense” (*LF* 160), and he degenerates into a mere mechanical voice, which is “all there is of him. When I’m switched on I tell my tale, the one I know, How Menelaus Became Immortal, but I don’t know it” (127). Another story in the same collection, “Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction”, contains the words of a dialogue between a disembodied taped voice and the machine, the voice being sick of its purposeless, abstract life and wishing to turn off the machine, which as a disembodied voice it cannot do, though the end of the tape finishes also the “life” of the voice.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, meta-reflection and self-interrogation are abstractions, too. Barth’s story “Title” starts: “Beginning: in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionlessness, abstraction, pro,

dis. And it will get worse, can we possibly continue?" (*LF* 102) In Barth's *LETTERS*, the result of meta-reflection is the computer as writer. It is the key instrument for the abstraction of rational patterning. The novel actually becomes patterned as a "fictional imitation of the analog computer, demanding that the protagonist and the reader perform the high-speed, simultaneous, and collaborative processes necessary in 'the great multiple field of impinging informations' where we live now" (LeClair 1982, 264). Bray's computer-constructed NOVEL develops through a reduction process into NOTES and then into NUMBERS. It constitutes a new genre that Barth calls "numerature", and loses in the process of abstraction and patterning all the flexibility and blanks of temporality in the futile and ridiculous attempt to establish the "absolute type", the "Platonic Form" (*Let* 32). Here again parody comes to the fore, in this case parody of the modern attempt at perfect form, as well as Barth's self-parody, the parody of his own obsessions with forms and patterns and numbers, for instance the transformation of the Freitag triangle into a logarithmic spiral as a structural model for *Chimera*.<sup>68</sup> In the construction of *LETTERS* and its plots, in the excessive employment of mechanical patterns and systematic categorizations, used even for the designations of love, the abstraction of pattern operates as pattern that leads to nothing. The "masque of the burlesque", i.e. the comic mode, insures that the planted clues (in the manner of an [anti]detective novel) lead to nothing in the end. All that can be said for sure is that there are — as the title implies — letters on the page, since there are only "Arresting But Meaningless Patterns". This is even so in the love-relationships of Ambrose Mensch, whom the author calls his "alter ego and aesthetic conscience" (*Let* 653), and who, by losing his "initial view of things", is marked by a "paralyzing self-consciousness" (165, 652). He is obsessed with patterns, i.e. abstractions, and divides the status of his love-relationship with Germaine Amherst according to "the sequence of his mature prior connexions with women" (*Let* 386) into six stages, so that only the seventh, never accomplished stage would break the pattern and make him able really to love Germaine as a "self-existent" person (768). The incidents of the plot form an endless network of "Portentous Coincidences" (384). Both patterns and incidents, the abstract and the concrete, play against and confirm



one another in their (playful) meaninglessness/meaningfulness — which constitutes another form of the paradox.

Like Barth, Pynchon is a master at abstracting and parodying patterns. In *V.*, the name of the protagonist, “Stencil”, already suggests the obsessive need to produce “patterns and designs”,<sup>69</sup> in his case the pattern of the quest. It is abstracted by emptying the goal of the quest: Lady V. dissipates in the multiplicity of shapes and might be an invention, as well as the origin and cause of the quest, which remain without satisfactory motive. Patterns and designs in all of Pynchon’s novels are abstracted from the situations and their direct evidence. Purposelessness is an abstraction, and thus Bogine’s aimless rides on the subway back and forth through New York are an abstraction insofar as they do not have what travel generally has, that is a destination, a beginning, a middle and end. Hawkes, as mentioned above, is concerned in his novels with the abstraction of design from debris (*Travesty*). Elkin, in books like *Boswell: A Modern Comedy*, *The Dick Gibson Show*, and *The Franchiser*, creates characters from the ranks of the average who are lacking in personal substance. They feel to be nothing but voices abstracted from the conceptions of ordinariness. In William Gass’s “Mrs. Mean”, from *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories*, the narrator, who lives by voyeuristically participating in the lives of other people, calls the woman he observes Mrs. Mean: “I don’t know her name. The one I’ve made to mark her and her doings in my head is far too abstract. It suggests the glassy essence, the grotesquerie of Type; yet it’s honestly come by, and in a way it’s flattering to her, as if she belonged on Congreve’s stage” (106). By following the maxim: “signs without are only symbols of the world within” (133), the narrator “abstracts” himself into his own projections, his obsessions with sexuality, death, bodily decay.

In fact, both the strategy of shaping thoughts in contrasting patterns and the counterstrategy of deconstructing these shapes of reflection in favor of fragments of thought and mere verbiage produce abstractions of thought, disconnected from the subject (which becomes ineffable and unnamable), from the object (that has no longer the status of the “real” or the true but appears only as mental image) and from the relations of causality and logic. Leaving behind the task of dramatizing the limits of the thinking self, reflection joins imagination, indeed becomes a vehicle of the

imagination and its expansive energy. The text strives towards a meta-level of “aesthetic liberalism”, which recognizes no pre-established precepts or rules and attempts to reconcile the dualities by “transform[ing] the ceaseless tensions between the various modes of modern discourse into the conditions of possibility” (Cascardi 1992, 302). With the loss of the sense that reflection is conditioned by the specific relation between subject and object comes the risk of emptiness, of repetition and exhaustion.

(3) Chaos and fictional abstraction turn against exhausted organizing principles, against useful but arbitrary patterning that impose order on chaos, trying to assuage. The postmodern writers unravel these preformed systems of myth, thought, story, developed out of nearly unlimited elements and possibilities of combination, by their attitude of play that liberates the suppressed alternatives, deconstructs, and reconstructs pre-given tales and forms of tales (fairy tales as in Barthelme’s *Snow White* or Coover’s *Briar Rose* or mythic tales as in Barth’s *Giles Goat Boy* or *Chimera*, etc.). They act with the conviction that stories are arbitrary compositions of situations, and that single units of the story can be treated, combined, evaluated, and perspectivized quite freely. Familiar stories can be told from unfamiliar points of view by rearranging and transforming the pre-given components as in Katz’s *Creamy and Delicious*, Coover’s “The Brother”, “J’s Marriage”, and “The Gingerbread House” (from *Prick Songs and Descants*) or Calvino’s “The Castle of Crossed Destinies” (see McCaffery 1982a). The latter calls this kind of story “‘cubist’ in structure” [33]). One story thus holds and gives birth to many stories in a kind of dissemination of fictional worlds; the story can be multiplied indefinitely by unbounded creativity. Literature appears to be a treasure house of formal designs that can be manipulated at will. Calvino writes: “Yes, literature is a combinatory game which follows the possibilities implicit in its own material, independently of a personality of the author” (qtd. in McCaffery 1982a, 24). For Calvino the poet is a kind of Jester or Fool “who perform[s] his task [...] to show [...] that every straight line conceals a crooked obverse, every finished product a jumble of ill-fitting parts, every logical discourse a blah-blah-blah” (qtd. in McCaffery 1982a, 36).

Yet though the fantastic as principle and method of transformation, driven by the energy of play, seems to have

established itself as a self-serving principle, drawing on the infinite resources of the store house of fictions, it in fact, battles against the *gap*, the blank, the void, and nothingness that *is* the *really real* and cannot be avoided. Julio Cortázar, the Argentinean postmodern author, notes: “nothing is missing, not even, and especially, nothingness, the true solidifier of the scene” (*Blow* 111). Hawkes, speaking of “tragic irony” as a “romantic impulse constricted or put under pressure”, writes: “I should think that the romantic impulse is in itself a duality, or holds in balance the power of unlimited possibility and the nothingness that is the context of all creativity” (Ziegler and Bigsby 178). Fiction, according to Barth, is “a shield against a kind of nothingness”; it is, in fact, an “exorcism of nothingness, of the vacuum” (Ziegler and Bigsby 36), or of what Coover calls in *The Universal Baseball Association* “the final emptiness” (239). Nothingness is the really real that the fantastic both confronts and covers, presenting against it, hopefully, exuberantly, self-confidently, but also doubtfully, the fictional actuality of “something” imaginary and fantastic. Barth writes: “This is the final test. Try to fill the blank. [...] Efface what can’t be faced or else fill the blank. With words or more words” (*LF* 102). The fantastic mode demonstrates with semiotic excess and the interface of semantic emptiness and “fullness”, of concreteness and abstraction, the limits of reason and “meaning”, paradoxically both opening the gap and refilling, covering it. In Foucault’s terms, the fantastic is the result of “a form of thinking in which an interrogation of limits replaces the search for totality and in which a movement of transgression replaces a movement of contradictions” (1963, 767, my transl.). In fact, what the postmodern authors do is to activate and radicalize an immanent feature of the fantastic mode. It always contains, as Bessière notes, “the affirmation of emptiness”; it paradoxically both creates and covers absence by its presence, denotes “a severance of connecting lines of meaning [... a] gap between signifier and signified” (qtd. in Jackson 37), and it plays with it. The limit the fantastic challenges, and attacks, or plays with and succumbs to is the limit of possibility-thinking.

The status and function of the real are among the most difficult problems of postmodern fiction. Obviously, the status of the world in fiction is actual or possible, but not real. The real can only enter fiction as the idea of the real and the idea of the real is multi-

faceted. It is subject to rationalization, belief, and ideology, is not merely the real, but is always framed as the real by preconceptions, expectations, desires. All the interviews with postmodern writers confirm the fact that they reject the concept of the real. Barth says in an interview: "Since I don't know much about Reality, it will have to be abolished [...] Reality is a drag" (Enck 11). But, as mentioned, narrative has to accept the idea of "true" or elemental reality, which is force, force of experience, of storytelling, of the imagination, and of the void. Force confers to narrative the authority necessary to reject false forms, patterns, and conceptualizations in the name of "truth". Nothingness is the strongest force of reality and truth; it is real and questions the status of every fixed something. But then also certain regulating conceptions of the world are "real" or "true" in the sense that they are necessary for orientation in the world, even if they appear "under erasure" (Derrida). Coover notes, "the fiction writer is a truth teller. [...] the writer is still trying to penetrate reality, not escape from it. He approaches it with what Borges calls "'that lucid innocence': eyes open for the worst. I think of myself in that sense as a realist, and I imagine so do the others, though of course: new realities, new forms" (Ziegler and Bigsby 83). The concern with "truth" and "reality" restricts the scope of play. What play has overstepped — both the conceptions of "reality" and the instrumentality of the schemas of consciousness in general — remain present in absence. Play not only challenges (discarded) reality and the categories of understanding but is challenged by them, too. Play renders everything possible, even its own (self-)deconstruction by, as it were, playing itself out of the play, dissolving itself or becoming "serious".

Just as there are parallels between literature and poststructuralist philosophy in making play the key term for the activities of the imagination, there are such parallels also in the questions raised about play's all-encompassing power. Foucault notes the paradoxical position of the person living in the world, the curious fact that he or she can only grasp it in its (playful) representation. The subject, "from within the life to which he entirely belongs and by which he is traversed in his whole being, constitutes representations by means of which he lives, and on the basis of which he possesses that strange capacity of being able to represent to himself precisely that life", i.e., "reality" (Foucault 1970, 352). And

though the subject faces, in Lacan's terms, a cybernetic playing field of "floating signifiers", an "incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (1977, 154), there is the "real" behind language. The text "desires" the real, which, however, is nothing but language and its gaps. The "pure real" becoming identical with the unconscious is something that subverts, forms, insists on the void. In terms of the basic, paradoxical absence-presence figuration, the "nothing" is indeed the something "there waiting, for better or worse, but waiting" (Lacan 1997, 65). One can also argue in terms of language. Generally speaking, language "is both destructive of the thing [and reality] and allows the passage of the thing onto the symbolic plane, thanks to which the truly human register comes into its own" (Lacan 1991a, 219). Play has its limits because it threatens to become merely repetitive and empty: "this 'sliding-away' (glissement) conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself" (Lacan 1981, 61). Derrida finally emphasizes that the codes of realism and centrism are such that, even when they are deconstructed by the textual matrix, they still persist, transforming language into a (centered) world. He notes the "irrepressible desire for such a [transcendental] signified"; this leads to "the desire to restrict play"; this desire "is [...] irresistible":

Can one not affirm the nonreferral to the center, rather than bemoan the absence of the center? Why would one mourn for the center? Is not the center, the absence of play and difference, another name for death? [...] But is not the desire for a center, as a function of play itself, the indestructible itself? And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us? It is here that the hesitation between writing as decentering and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite. This hesitation is part of play and links it to death (*Writing* 1978, 297).

In spite of the deconstruction of the concepts of the real, the real remains present not only as elemental force but also as form, as the ideas of metaphysics, of center and structure, and of nothingness, of death, of the void. According to Democritus, whom Beckett quotes in *Malone Dies*, "Nothing is more real than nothing" (*Moll* 193). The fantastic thus defines itself in the text not only as disorder against order but also as the "irreal", as enforcer of the possible, as complementary to the actual, in fact as part of the "real", which

appears always “under erasure”, as a “minus function” (Lotman), as the ineffable. The form of the interface of the actual and the possible, and therefore the signum of both the fantastic and the “real”, is the paradox.

#### 5.4. Strategies of Negation and Re-creation

The fantastic mode is an art of *negation*, also of ironic self-negation; in other words, it does not deconstruct, but also reconstructs drawing on the generative potential of fiction. It engenders disappearance and new appearance or re-appearance. The negation of norms, connections, and coherences results in what we have called situationalism, which is the basis of the fantastic. Situationalism is the restrictor or transformer of the thematic and psychological codes and the generator of the fantastic mode, which, on the basis of the “liberated” fictional situation, can work freely, unhampered by the relational system and the conventions of fiction. As mentioned, situationalism is the consequence of a historic development of negation in the novel from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, of the negation of totalizing units like plot, character, morals, etc. In the postmodern deconstructive turn, the dominance of the social frame of the situation, character, and action/event, over the “natural” frame, space and time, is also negated. This leads to the dissolution of the centered structure of the situation, usually focused on the character and events, causality of the sequence of situations, which is guaranteed by character and plot. What happens between deconstruction and reconstruction is both a playful, formal “*dramatization*” and “*de-dramatization*” of the text, reaching in the extreme case the point where, in Piaget’s words, “everything is connected with everything else [so that] nothing is connected with anything else” (1928, 61), which, again, is a formulation of the postmodern paradox that builds on the interaction of connection and separation, something and nothing. The techniques of fantastic deconstruction and reconstruction are manifold. A list of some of the most obvious ones offers an overview of strategic possibilities with which the fantastic worlds are built. Some of the examples have already been mentioned before but appear here in another, systematic context of deconstruction and reconstruction (the variations of plot we will discuss later).

*Narrator and Narration:* (1) The narrated situation is blended into the situation of the narrator. It thereby abolishes any formal demarcation between story and discourse, with the result that there is no longer a clear-cut difference between the mediated and the mediator, between a fictional character and the narrator, between narration and reflection on narration. A new space is created in-between all narrative instances. The narrator just like the reader can enter the story at will, become a character, and blur the borderlines (Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*; Federman, *Double or Nothing, Take It or Leave It*; Sukenick, *Up, The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*). An extreme case occurs in Federman's *Take It or Leave It*, where the fact that the narrator and the hero of the first-person narrative are the same character is linguistically and comically dramatized:

But in case you guys get confused in the course of this twin recitation with the me and the he

& the I and the He

& the me now and the he then

& the he past and the me present

(he past in the hole

me present on

the platform

let me make it quite clear once and for all lest WE forget it

(here & there & everywhere)

I am here [alone]

He is there [together we are]

as one are we not / multiple though single / I + HE = WE or WE-I = HE pluralized in our singularity

me telling him

him telling me etc.

thus again should you guys confuse me for him as I confuse myself with him and in him and vice versa let me assure you you may be confused or you may not even care. (*ToL*)<sup>70</sup>

(2) In addition to the narrator's situation, the writer's appears as incorporated into the text (Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse, LETTERS*). Not only are the characters artists who discuss the problems of a writer, interposing statements about the medium, literary codes, and the conventions of narrative (often in an ironic or parodic way) that appear in the narrative itself, thus disturbing the "good" continuation of the narrative flow and "dramatizing" the creative act, but the author himself as the creator of writer can appear within the text (Federman, *Double or Nothing, The Voice in the*

*Closet*; Sukenick, *Up*; *Out*). The writer may enter the text and help his character and “leave” again to take care of his own business “outside”. Or the characters may visit the author. In Sukenick’s *Up*, the real-life models of his characters come to him to congratulate the author Sukenick on the completion of his book: “Now Sukenick is holding a champagne glass in the air and doing his own crazy dance to Greek bouzouki music. He must be drunk already. Live it up Ron boy, the book’s almost over” (324). In Barth’s *LETTERS*, the author writes letters to his former characters from “within” the book, asking them to allow him to use them again in his new novel, and gets answers from them, stipulating conditions for their reappearance. Thus the fictional material from former novels is recycled, making the characters “doubly” fictional in their position in-between the books. In Sorrentino’s novel *Mulligan Stew*, which incorporates a novel-in-progress by Tony Lamont and the diaries of a character in Lamont’s novel, this character, Halpin, is aware of the “job” he has to do as a character in the novel and is dissatisfied with his role.

(3) The exchangeability of reference systems (of scientific, psychological, sociological, metaphysical viewpoints) is used to make each perspective relative in its truth value, and to render equally fantastic both the application of a single perspective and the fusion of a number of perspectives. The fictional point of view again is in-between, referring always to the other (Pynchon, *V.*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*; Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*).

*Disruption of Situational Logic*: (1) The situation ceases to have subjective, i.e., *existential* meaning for the inner self as an authentic expression of character. The protagonist in Elkin’s *The Dick Gibson Show* “had no character” (254): his character is his “voice” (251). Together with the dominance of character the situation loses its center. Hawkes says that the most he can do is “deal with the components, the parts, the inadequate fragments of human nature” (Bellamy 1974, 102); and one of Barth’s characters notes: “You say you lack a ground-situation. Has it occurred to you that that circumstance may be your ground-situation?” (*LF* 115).

(2) In the narrated situation one or all of the situational constants, space, time, character, action/event, are deformed and fantasized, the borderlines transgressed. The house in which the characters stay, in Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, ends in nothingness. The boundaries between the animate and the inanimate are sus-



pended in Pynchon's *V.*: Lady V. finally turns out to be only a collection of mechanical parts (See also Barthelme; Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Crying of Lot 49*).

(3) The multiplication of what is possible and probable in a given situation results in the presentation of one situation in a number of versions of equal actuality and probability, without any temporal or ontological priority residing in any one version (Coover, "The Babysitter;" Federman, *Take It or Leave It*). The elimination of a single situational logic can take such a radical form that, for example, a character in a falling elevator is able to step out of it at any time before it crashes to the ground, thus abolishing the borderline between actuality and potentiality, and demonstrating the multiplicity of imaginative possibilities in contrast to the limitations of the actual (Coover, "The Elevator;" Federman, *Take It or Leave It*; Nabokov, *Bent Sinister*, *Look at the Harlequins*). The multiplication of narrative endings removes its definitive character and transforms it ad infinitum so that the reader can choose an ending or, for that matter, no ending (Brautigan, *A Confederate General from Big Sur*; Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*).

(4) The dislocation of situational details from one another and their emphasized autonomous status serve to deny any combinational order or rational, emotional hierarchy of elements and values; every detail thus is the "other", stands in-between possible schemes of coherence. In Brautigan's *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, we are told about what will happen to the things a woman owns after she is dead: "They'll put them inside a celery root and then discover a way of making battleships out of celery roots and over the waves her things will travel" (41; cf. also Brautigan, *Hawklime Monster*; Barthelme, *The Dead Father*, "The Indian Uprising;" Sukenick, *Out*, 98.6). Various situations can in fact be folded into and disrupt one another in their stability as well as in their continuity (Barthelme, "The Indian Uprising").

(5) An existential situation of pain and injury is reduced to a purely "experimental" and "artificial", coolly detached and "abstracted" demonstration of brutality, while the expected human reaction is withheld in the text. The writer leaves out psychological motivation, does not make an attempt at signification, and thus denies the reader rational explanation and the possibility of

understanding and humanizing the situation by identifying with the victim (Hawkes *The Lime Twig*; Sukenick, 98.6).

(6) The narrated situation is isolated from time-sequence and a narrative continuum. It does not only lose its temporal connections, as in modernism, but also its “logical” connection with the preceding and following situations. The composition becomes serial, which means that the “horizontal”, temporal, and logical continuity is broken up. Again, as Federman claims: “the elements of the new fictitious discourse (words, phrases, sequences, scenes, spaces, etc.) must become digressive from one another — digressive from the element that precedes and the element that follows. In fact, these elements will now occur simultaneously and offer multiple possibilities of rearrangement in the process of reading” (1975, 11). Thus, in the most radical case, the sequential logic is abandoned in favor of an interchangeability of situational units (Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*; Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*; Federman, *Take It or Leave It*; Sukenick, *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*). This implies also the deconstruction of the patterns of plot and history, about which more will be said later in connection with time and succession.

*Contrast Between Situation and Linguistic Representation:*

(1) The simple, seemingly matter-of-fact mode of linguistic representation is used to contradict and complicate the reader’s response to an unusual narrated situation, which thus becomes unrealistic. This method of detachment goes together with the attempt of the “minimalists” among the postmodern writers to “cleanse” art of “expressionism” and thus to bar the thoughtless projection of the inner into the outer. This kind of narrative method leaves many empty spaces between the given details and deprives the situation of its fullness, reducing the fictional world to a “diagram” (Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*, *The Hawkline Monster*; Barthelme, *Snow White*, *The Dead Father*).

(2) The counterstrategy is to expand a situation into the fantastic by metaphor, thus making use of the unlimited possibilities of transforming and abstracting meaning from the concrete gestalt and circumventing the long-practiced tradition of giving the reader clear formal signals of the situation’s specific significance. In Brautigan’s *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, the narrator says: “Elaine stared at the waves that were breaking like ice cube trays out

of a monk's tooth or something like that. Who knows? I don't know" (154).

(3) The expansion of the seemingly fixed meaning of a phrase (e.g., "trout fishing in America") into an infinity of imaginative contexts shows the domination of the imagination over merely conventionally formalized relations between signifier and signified and of accepted language patterns, and to stimulate the imagination of the reader by breaking through the horizon of expectation (Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*).

(4) The alphabetical order may be used as "shaping principle" for the ordering of a number of meditations, as in Gilbert Sorrentino's *Splendide-Hotel* where he writes: "One must find some structure, even it be this haphazard one of the alphabet" (75, 14). On the first pages the reader finds entries under the headings, "ABORTION", "AKTEDRON", "ANDERSON, LANE", "ANDERSON, VALERIE" or "ANGRIE, EUGENE". In Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*, the letters of the alphabet are the matrix of composition and theme, the text being divided into fifty-two sections, each marked by and limited to a letter from the alphabet, from A to Z and then from Z to A. The letters give the text a "constrictive form" (Klinkowitz 1977, 68), for example the letter "A": "Africa again: Albert arrives, alive and arguing about African art, about African angst, and also, alas, attacking Ashanti architecture, as author again attempts an agonizing alphabetical appraisal" (1-2). The narrating process can deteriorate to a playing with words, as in the following cases: "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (Barthelme, *SW* 6) "In fact there can also be more words words!" (Federman, *Tol*, n.p.) "I'm going to finish this today, the hell with it. I've had enough of this. I'm just playing with words anyway. What did you think I was doing? Just playing with words ga-ga-ga-ga-ga- ga-goo-goo-gig-geg-gug-gack" (Suknick, *Up* 329).<sup>71</sup>

(5) "The mindless unfolding of verbiage" (LeVot 55) suspends the comprehensibility of syntactical patterns, impedes the iconic and referential qualities of language, and is simply the other among the referentialities of linguistic significance, thus defusing the concretization of a fictional situation in the reader's mind. Federman says: "When I discovered Céline I found myself confronting pure verbal delirium, and when I write fiction [...] deliriousness is a

crucial aspect of it”; and he admires “Sukenick’s linguistic distortions”, which “seem very natural” (LeClair and McCaffery 149). The deconstruction of language leads to the abandonment of the story; according to Federman’s telling phrase, “we were all at one point or another in our careers working our way toward the erasure of language” (150). In order to de-rationalize language, in Barthelme’s *The Dead Father*, even the experience of death is played with in a jumble of words that includes nonsense in sense:

AndI. EndI. Great endifarce teeterteeterteetertottering. Willit urt. I reiterate. Don’t be cenacle. Conscientia mille testes. And having made them, where now? what now? Mens agitat molem and I wanted to do it well, do it well.[...] Enjoying the endthusiasm which your endtente has endgendered.[...] AndI replied that Old AndI not so interested in maidens as formerly. Quantum mutatus illo! [...] Reiterate and reiterate that to the best of my knowledge and belief I was Papping as best I could like my AndI before me palmam qui meruit ferat. [...] Endeavoring to meet ends. To the bicker end. Endocardial endocarditis [...] Let’s have a party. Pap in on a few old friends. Pass the papcorn [...] Don’t understand! Don’t want it! Fallo fallere fefelli falsum! [...] I was compassionate, insofar as it was possible to be so. Best I cud I did! Absolutely! No dubitatio about it! Don’t like! Don’t want! Pitterpatter oh please pitterpatter (213-15; see also Barthelme, “The Sentence”).

The fantastic is the negation of the ordinary, the expected, and used-to, of the traditional idea of the “real”, and the true. Negation and its “tearing asunder” here finally have become self-serving, a mere generator of both vital and destructive human energies, of the unlimited desire for movement and incessant change, of the precipitous urge to imagine, formulate, and consume every possibility and every human potential. The binary mechanisms of exclusion have been rejected as arrogant, even “terroristic”, and rigorous moral antitheses have been suspended in an attempt to expand experience and aesthetic form.<sup>72</sup> Flexibility is gained in connecting the paradigms of knowledge and judgment and opening them up to another meaning, a more radical stance. This elasticity makes room for the non-classified, the intractable, and also for new evaluations and play with the new. In this sense, the fantastic and its methods of negation are the operators of the principle of the *possible*, set against that of the actual. As argued above, “possibility-thinking” (Musil) and narration may be able to fill the gap and cover the void,

but they cannot abolish either of them because they are the “realistic” and “existential” underside of postmodern fiction.

## 6. The Space-Time Continuum

Negation, abstraction, and fantastication work together in establishing new fields of creative possibilities that affect the discourses of space and time and their continuum. Space and time are the basic coordinates of the “natural” frame of the situation, while the social frame is formed by character and action/event. All orientation in time presupposes an orientation in space and vice versa. Though any conceivable experiential or fictional situation always interrelates the elements of space, time, character, and action/event, these constitutive elements form separate categories with characteristics of their own that can be isolated. The literary discourses of space and time are necessarily selective; they present and accentuate some features more than others. The selection and combination of these features change over the course of history. In narrative are changed the detailing, the profile, the evaluation, and function of space and time. The interrelation between space and time, however, is indissoluble, since time, having no substance of its own, needs a mediator, namely space. Time does not flow along without a concrete substratum, and mental time also needs sensory images for memory or forecast. Space, on the other hand, is not given without time, time’s protean profile and value. Space and time interrelate with value. Value is invested in place and objects, in duration and change. Stasis and dynamis stabilize or alter the surface and the core of things, characters, conditions, and the world in general. The poles of appearance and disappearance are in constant struggle with one another. Their dialectic forms one of the paradigms of postmodern fiction.

In the history of time and space conceptions, Kant plays an all-important role, as he supported and made prevail the absolutist theories of time and space (space and time as absolute categories *a priori*). In accordance with such notions, the writers of the nineteenth century understood time not so much as subjective-existential time but as “objective” and collective time of the empirical world. It was experienced and theorized in its various, intersubjective models of transitoriness and permanence. Time was the always available, all-encompassing dimension of being, reaching into past and future, and structured by the idea of progress. Only at the end of the nineteenth

century did these absolutist conceptions come to be refuted and replaced by notions of relativity that constituted the theory of space-time, time being the fourth dimension of space. In an historic lecture, Hermann Minkowsky asserted in 1908: "Henceforth space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away". "Nobody has ever noticed a place except at a time, or time except at a place" ("Space" 297-98). The novel at the end of the nineteenth century puts this idea into practice and makes the mental interrelation of space and time more intimate, which then becomes the hallmark of modernism (see Joyce, *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom*). At the beginning of modernism, space (plus things in space) and time combine into an (animated) space-time continuum, or in the words of Wyndham Lewis: "chairs and tables, mountains and stars, are animated into a magnetic restlessness, and exist on the same vital terms as man. They are as it were the lowest grade, the most sluggish of animals. All is alive; and in that sense, all is mental" (433).

In a further important development that is basic for the handling of time in postmodern fiction, theoretical physicists like Stephen F. Hawking in *A Brief History of Time* have extended the idea that time on all its dimensions is a mental construct, not only "subjective" mind-time but also "objective" clock-time. Both are constructs of the mind. Their separate discourses make clock-time regular, uniform, quantitative, irreversible, and make subjective mind-time relative, multiform, reversible, and organized into past, present, and future through memory and forecast. Since the distinction between clock-time and mind-time is nothing but a convention, it can be easily overturned and played with. According to contemporary theory, there is no reason why "the arrow of time" under certain circumstances could not rather point from the future to the past rather than from the past to the future. Again the postmodern writers follow suit. Sukenick writes that "[r]ealistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative [together with] an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization" and "the ultimate, concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description"; for him and his colleagues "all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic" because "[r]eality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist" (*DN* 41). One need not go so far in the deconstruction of time, but as

Peter Osborne writes: “what we call ‘time’ is the reified result of an ongoing process of temporalisation, part of the *active (self) production* of a particular kind of being, rather than a merely given form. For Heidegger “[t]here is no nature-time, since all time belongs essentially to *Dasein*” (Osborne 36-62, 41).

Not time but the *interpretation* of time (and space) and its variability are the crucial factors. The interpretations of time can make use of all the traditional notions of time, but only as conceptual *possibilities* of conceptualizing, and not as “real” states of time. The conceptualization of time generally employs three elemental models, which in our later section on time will be the guiding lines of analysis. Time is seen as (1) *linear/progressive* time (personal, social, historical, structured in terms of cause and effect, of origin, process and goal, of beginning, middle, and end), or as (2) *circular/cosmic* time of nature (universal, life-oriented, repetitive), or, finally, as (3) *subjective/mental* time (experience, memory, expanded connections between past, present, future; duration, giving a person identity; fusion of subject and object in the moment of being, revelation or vision, anticipation of death). These are of course only positions on a scale with many transitions, overlappings, and quite different evaluations. Time is — implicitly or explicitly — linked with belief, with ethics, psychology, politics. Questions arise and have to be answered: “Is personality essentially given from the outset [...] or does it change in essential and unpredictable ways [...] Does character development resemble the way a seed develops into a plant? Does it merely ‘unfold’ or does it truly ‘become’? Can we make ourselves different or is such change itself prescribed in advance?” (Morson, *Narrative and Freedom* 1994, 2). Or: “what is history? What purpose does it serve? Does it express the truth? If so, how? If not, what good is it?” (Price 1999, 1). The fact that these questions cannot be answered “objectively”, in spite of all scientific progress, makes any given answer the result of ideology; and the various ideologies war with one another, establishing a further (4) *combinational* time model, a paradigm of struggling concepts of time that change and that appear under changing dominance relationships. The rivalry between concepts of “objective” clock time and subjective mind time is key.

If time needs to be constructed, it can also be deconstructed. The structure of time is restricted. With the loss of defining human



contexts, beginnings and endings may disappear. In disappearing, they become unfathomable and deprive the middle of time of the basics of orientation, namely origin and goal. If time cannot be structured from the beginning and cannot be fathomed in respect to its process or progress, the last resort is still the *end*, which can be orchestrated in terms of what Frank Kermode calls the “concord fiction” of *apocalypse*. “Concord fiction” combines the idea of an ending and that of a new beginning. The paradigm of an ending that does *not* give hope for a new beginning is *entropy*. Human life and the “strange, eventful history” of humankind enact a continuous “struggle against entropy” (Coover, *PB* 238). When, finally, the “human” structuring and interpretation of time both lose their fixed points of reference, i.e., the beginning *and* the end, the various modes of time seem to disappear into mere *contingency*. The latter defines the middle without beginning and end in terms of the accidental. Projected into writing, the accidental turns into randomness and thwarts the attempts at structuring time by beginning and end, by the process of meaning-giving. Barthelme sees the greatest difficulty in the beginning of writing. In “The Dolt” he writes: “Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin” (*UP* 65). The protagonist/historian in Gass’s *The Tunnel* is not so much worried about beginnings: “[e]ndings, instead, possess me ... all ways out” (*Tun* 3). Pynchon’s books are examples of the combination of the three paradigms, apocalypse, entropy, and oceanic undifferentiation in the middle, all three suggesting states of affairs that include the ineffable. Postwar Germany, called the “Zone” in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, is an example. It is characterized by the overall deconstruction of time concepts by war, by the fact that “[t]he War has been reconfiguring time and space into its own image” (257), its image being apocalypse, waste and entropy, and undifferentiation.

*Space*, or referential space, is always related to time through change and movement. It contains places and things; it is structured as time is by the perspective of an experiencing subject. Just as the discourses of time are shaped by the relations between chronological/mechanical and subjective/mental time, and the interaction between present and past, present and future, the discourses of space are organized in terms of relations between inside and outside, breadth and depth, nearness and distance, closure and openness, finiteness

and infinity, horizontal and vertical dimensions. People are simply oriented in time, and they are obviously oriented in space, which puts them in a specific place. From the experiencing subject's point of view, space opens from the near to the far in ever widening horizons. The manifestations of space, of spatial relations and objects (as of time) are not neutral, but are perspectivized by the relationship between the subject and the object. They are *perceptual, emotional, cognitive, utilitarian*: they are determined by *attitudes* that are theoretically separable, but that in practice combine and interrelate because all space is *experienced* space, and experience includes the activity of several if not all human faculties, though of course priority may be given to the one or the other.

For modernist writers the existential relationship between the human being and space becomes crucial. With the failing of the ideologies of progress, the isolation of the individual and the retreat of communication in the twentieth century, narration comes to emphasize ways of relating to the world that are more elemental than those of rationality; fiction activates what one might call bodily consciousness, thus following belatedly Carlyle's dictum in *Sartor Resartus* (derived from Kant): "That the Thought-forms, Space and Time, wherein, once for all, we are sent into this Earth to live, should condition and determine our whole Practical reasonings, conceptions, and imagings or imaginings, — seems altogether fit, just, and unavoidable" (197). The novel, now less concerned with society, morality, and progress than with the self and its isolation and its existential quest for identity and truth, confirms what Ernst Cassirer wrote at the end of the 1920s: "there is no accomplishment and creation of the mind that does not make reference in one way or another to the world of space, that does not as it were attempt to make itself at home in it. For a turning towards this world the first necessary step is towards concretization, towards the perception and definition of being. Space, as it were, forms the general medium in which the spiritual production first can 'establish' itself, can bring itself to its first forms and gestalten" (Cassirer 174-75). Karl Jaspers notes that the processes of consciousness are represented in spatial terms: "*Pictorially* we imagine consciousness as the *stage* on which individual spiritual phenomena "come and go" (qtd. in Iser 1993, 336). And Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "relation of totality". People have to the place they live in, a relation negotiated by the

body: “We said space is existential; we also could have said, existence is spatial, that indeed it opens itself to something ‘external,’ and it does so in such an essential way, that we can speak of a spiritual space and a world of meanings and the objects of thought which constitute themselves in this world” (1962, 341).

### 6.1. Spatial Form

The increasing structural weight of the spatial element in modern fiction has given rise to a discussion of the “spatialization” of the novel. However, the sense of this phrase (as that of the term “spatial”) is ambivalent. It does not refer to the spatial referentiality of the text so much as to a special kind of structure of the text. The term serves to separate a “spatial” order of the text, which emphasizes simultaneity and cross-references, from temporal and logical/causal orders, which accentuate sequentiality. In the traditional novel the temporal and causal orders are intimately related; in the modernist novel this relation is questioned, even suspended as falsity. In Roland Barthes’s words: “Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*. In which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc — ergo propter hoc*” (1977, 94). The loosening, challenging and finally dissolving of the implicit and explicit connections between the temporal and causal orders deprives the flow of time of a firm and integrating, logical, and “objective” patterning and makes the structuring of narrative dependent on psychological and ideological factors. The subjectivization of time according to psychological needs as the last resource of structuring the temporal process does not only set the inner significant perception of time against the outer “mechanical” process of time (as, for instance, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*); once the unity of time and causality is broken up, other spatial and psychological causalities step into the foreground: the causality of the environment in naturalism and that of character in modernism. In the first case place and things take on the function of reflectors of social

circumstances, in the latter the role of providing an area for the projection of the inner states of the mind and soul onto the outside.

In the radical cases of modernism, the deterioration or abolishment of causality turns into anti-causality or irrational causality (Kafka), and out of the loss of temporal order and coherence arises a vacuum that is filled by what has been termed “spatial” order, which is complex and requires a greater interpretative effort from the reader. Roman Jakobson analyzes this complex spatial order, in Todorov’s words, as “symmetries, gradations, antitheses, parallelisms, etc” (1981, 47).<sup>73</sup> Joseph Frank in his well-known essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” states “that modern literature, exemplified by such writers as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust and James Joyce, is moving in the direction of spatial form. This means that the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence” (Frank 225). For documentation he uses an early example of the “spatialization of form”: the market-place tableau in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Here “the time-flow of the narrative is halted: attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the limited time-area. These relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative; and the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relations among the units of meaning” (Frank 231). Proust and Joyce have taken over this method, and have rendered spatial form prominent in the novel, and have further developed it towards a spatialization of time, which is the result of “continual reference and cross-reference of images and symbols which must be referred to each other spatially throughout the time-act of reading” (Frank 232). This is a method of composition that requires the recipient to read the book in terms of *separation* and *connection*.

Sharon Spencer and others have elaborated Frank’s ideas, using, like Frank, the literal and figurative meaning of “spatial” without differentiation. Spencer states that “in the novel [...] there exists an observable struggle to subdue the patterns suggested by time in its accustomed sense to those existing in its new spatial sense”. She studies those novels “that embody approximations of time-space fusions achieved by various ingenious structural procedures”, by “the principle of juxtaposition”, using either “a single exclusively maintained and often unusual perspective” or “a

great variety of perspectives simultaneously focused upon the subject”, (xx-xxi).<sup>74</sup> She distinguishes types of novels according to the use of these principles. For our argument we will maintain the difference between “referential” space (referential of course only in terms of the fictional world), on the one hand, and “spatial” form, i.e., the creation of cross-references based on the working of simultaneity in the narrative (and reading) process, on the other. The literal and figurative meaning of space entails two different narrative strategies that should be separated analytically, even though they mix in the concrete text and have the same origin and cause: doubt and distrust in the “good” continuation of time and in the teleology of metaphysical and social order.<sup>75</sup> But “spatial” form also needs more clarification as to its function in postmodern fiction, since it is not employed for the creation of meaning in the traditional or modernist sense. It is in fact formalized and relativized in a contrasting synthesis of *simultaneity and seriality*.

Just as space is characterized by *stasis* and *simultaneity*, time is distinguished by *dynamis* and *succession*. Stasis and dynamis, simultaneity and succession are different but correlated aspects of the space-time continuum that constitute any given situation. Stasis and dynamis, simultaneity and succession are intimately related to *separation* and *connection*. There is no connection without separation. Connection requires that there be, first of all, separateness and separability of elements, which then can be connected in a meaningful way or be set to defy such connectability. In the continuous process of construction and deconstruction characteristic of postmodern fictional strategies, separation and connection play against one another to create of juxtapositions, gaps, blanks, linguistic disorder, verbal patterns, the scattering of words on the page, all those strategies that dissolve dualities of thought and value, and stress the “wordiness” of literature. The dialectic process of separation and connection in itself constitutes a meaningful pattern built on the elements of space (separateness) and time (connection). If the division, the lack of unity between separation and connection are emphasized, the good and easy continuation of the semantic order during the reading process is fragmented or negated. Both mere fragmentation and mere fusion bring about a loss of recognizability of the narrated situation, of logical continuity and meaningful signification; they invest the situation with a quality of “irreality”, of

the fantastic, of abstraction from the “full” and “regular” representation of the situation. This fragmentary form radically differs from the conventional “scripts” of situations that the reader stores up from experiencing and categorizing life; but this fragmentation is here paradoxically presented as the truly *life-like* experience, as the “true” condition that includes disorder in order, discontinuity in continuity, force of destruction in the form of construction. Federman writes in *Double or Nothing*: “Variety that’s the spice of life Though after a while it gets repetitious A guy must vary if he wants to survive Must invent Let it happen by itself Let the damn thing shape itself by itself Create new forms New noodles Improvise anything Improvise on a puff of smoke QUICKLY And keep going” (5). Sukenick reassuringly turns the argument around, looks at its other side, continuity: “It doesn’t matter where you start. You must have faith. Life is whole and continuous whatever the appearances” (*ESS* 7). We will return to the phenomenon of simultaneity and succession later.

## 6.2. Time

### 6.2.1. Linearity, Event, Depth, and Narrative

Since narrative focuses on continuity and development, its basic element, at least since Lessing, has been considered to be time.<sup>76</sup> The concepts of time are historical. In postmodern philosophy and narrative, they are multiple and contradictory. Deleuze, for instance, recognizes two different aspects of time, of which the second is a rejection of the first. He refers to the Stoics who call the two forms of time *chronos* and *aion*. Chronos, chronological time, is inseparable from space and matter. Its logic of sequence is the basis of the logic of cause and effect. *Aion* is the unlimited continuum of incorporeals, the source from which presence ceaselessly flows. It is pre-individual and impersonal; it is, as it were, a temporal vacancy from which everything that exists takes its origin. It is the time of production and creativity and is thus the time of freedom and of the imagination, of art and its imaginary worlds, its intensities, and its “events”. It is also the time of art’s “singularities”; “these singularities [...] are more us than we are ourselves, more divine than the gods, as they animate concretely poem and aphorism, permanent

revolution and partial action". It is our task "to make pre-individual and nonpersonal singularities speak" (Deleuze 1990, 72-73). Going beyond the systematic aspects of time and narrative, Deleuze approaches open time via desire (of which more later), just as Leo Bersani does in his book *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*. In order to deal with open time, Derrida, as mentioned, develops the concept of "différance", which stresses the aspects of movement and the deferral of time. Sukenick takes up the two aspects of *aion* for his own theory of fiction. Time on the one hand is "empty", marks the reservoir of possibilities, of drives and energies of force. It is "the fundamentally open whole as the immensity of the future and the past" (*ESS* 46). But it is also the time of singularities, "the ultimate existence of parts, of different sizes and shapes, which cannot be adopted, which do not develop at the same rhythm" (*Out* 101).

The task of art's force to foster "permanent revolution", to create "pre-individual and non-personal singularities", and to keep open the uncategorizable "source" of all movement sets off poetry against narrative, narrative being bound by its greater length to linearity (the development of the one out of the other), and forming a pattern of surface relations. As is evident in the remarks of postmodern authors about plot, character, scenery, and theme, there is a certain suspicion even among postmodern writers of narrative, the fear that their medium favors *chronos*, order and a measurable whole, i.e. closed time, over *aion*, open time and the continuity of process and movement — a suspicion that is strengthened by philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida. Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida, reaching beyond the linear surface appearance of time, speak of the "event as a moment of depth", the event of "Being", which interrupts and counters mechanical, chronological temporality with the existential and elemental dimensions of time. Heidegger favors poetry because "[i]n 'poetical' discourse the communication of the existential possibilities of one's state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence" (1971, 205). This disclosure of existence is "the letting happen of the advent of the truth". It is an "event" that cannot be "proved or derived from what went before" (1971, 72, 75). Lyotard emphasizes the imponderableness of the event: "Complete information means

neutralizing more events. What is already known cannot, in principle, be experienced as an event" (1991, 65).

The representation of this existential event, in which something like Being (Heidegger) in whatever form, discloses itself, would be impeded by the linearity and immanent causal logic of narrative. As Levinas states: "If we are to understand the problem of Being, our first philosophical step consists [...] in not 'telling a story' — that is to say, in not defining entities as entities by tracing them back in their origin to some other entities, as if being had the character of some possible entity". Narrative is apt to confirm us in our "tranquillized supposition" (1990, 26, 223) of inauthentic, homogenizing life, while poetry can draw us out of it in the authentic event of Being. For Levinas, "being" in narrative "has a non-dialectical faculty, stops dialectics and time". Narrative, however, turns events into "situations". The images and situations of narrative do not have "the quality of the living moment which is open to the salvation of becoming, in which it can end and be surpassed" (139, 141). Lyotard, arguing against the "grand narratives", i.e., the grand projects of Western society, is skeptical about narrative in general, too. In poetry, event and desire, the opaque and obscure, as well as the figural, constantly disturb the order of discourse, impose discontinuity on language. Diachronic narrative, however, does not shatter chronological time and linguistic order, but is on the contrary contained by them, by succession and its irreversibility, by the clarity and distinctness of the narrative system, which is indifferent to the indiscernible, inarticulable, to the event, which is the emergence of the other.

Yet the perspective that privileges the "Event" is an essentializing one: it gives a one-sided view of narrative. A much more positive picture emerges (also with Derrida) if, instead of the absolute and its vertical axis, the horizontal axis and the continuum of time are made the locus of the infinite, and the multiplicity of situations, the attachment to particularity and the constant deferral of meaning can create the site of that infiniteness. Rorty thus comes to affirm "the novelist's taste for narrative, detail, diversity, and accident" (1980, 73), the countering of abstraction and essentialism in narrative. Yet the argument changes when the difference between poetry and narrative prose is blurred, too. Lyotard and Deleuze note that the "event" can never be grasped and represented, that discourse



produces only a *simulacrum* of the event, and that only the modes of representation are different, that they can be both narrative and lyric, because they show the event anyway in a “deconstructed sense”, in fact “designate something other which resembles it” (1991, 24).

Postmodern fiction does not aim at the “event” as a moment of depth. The “event” in postmodern fiction is the invasion of outer, mysterious forces, as we will show later. The reign of “a new depthlessness” in the New Fiction causes the “waning of affect”, the (partial) suspension of the modern feeling of anxiety and angst, but also, according to Jameson’s rather ill-humored and disapproving listing, the rejection of “at least four other fundamental depth models”:

the dialectical one of essence and appearance (along with a whole range of concepts of ideology or false consciousness which tend to accompany it); the Freudian model of latent and manifest, or of repression [...]; the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity whose heroic or tragic thematics are closely related to that other great opposition between alienation and disalienation, itself equally a casualty of the poststructural or postmodern period; and (4), most recently, the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified, which was itself rapidly unraveled and deconstructed during its brief heyday in the 1960s and 1970s (Jameson 1992, 12).

In the same way the postmodern writers shun depth, they also attempt to avoid linearity. In depth there is only the void; in linearity lurk unavoidable causal relations and the danger of closure. Yet they can escape neither the void nor sequential time, a condition that makes for struggle and paradox. John Barth warns against too much deconstruction since “[a]s individuals we still live in calendar and clock time” (Bellamy 1974, 16). All attempts to deconstruct time in postmodern fiction start out with chronological time, in order to state the meaning of time, the loss of time, the end of time, and the void. Postmodern fiction employs linear, historical time, cyclical, cosmic time, psychic-existential time and the simultaneity of concepts of time and deconstructs them at the same time in order to mark the ontological disruptions of the imaginative worlds.

As mentioned, the three models of time will provide the framework for the following discussion. These particular temporal categories form rubrics under which phenomena like *plot*, *suspense*, *succession*, the *ordinary* and *extraordinary* can be analyzed. In

contrast to society and its thinking in terms of progress, (cyclical) *Life* evolves as an alternative frame of reference, as a value system placed against the linearity of history, and the notions of beginning and end. Life offers a way out of anthropocentric thought, out of rigorous categorical distinctions, out of the burden of history and the feeling of alienation. Of course, the postmodernists allow none of these conceptions of time a kind of supremacy that would establish a hierarchy of perspectives and values. They are interrelated, overlaid, opposed, relativized, played with, but are always present in terms of the actual or the possible and the multiplicity of the manifestations of time.

### 6.2.2. Linear Time as Historical, Teleological, Mechanical Time

History is not a natural given but a human construct, as are all other perspectives of time or space.<sup>77</sup> Unlike God and nature, whose conceptual statuses are eternity or duration, history, being not immutable but subject to change, allows not only the construction but also the deconstruction of its status as a stable meaning-giving principle. Four types of history writing have been distinguished; they provide traditional, exemplary, critical, or genetic accounts of the past.<sup>78</sup> Historiography can bridge the gap between past and present by pointing out the “historicity of consciousness” in general, as Dilthey did (1958, 261), and the “‘incapsulation’ of the past in the present” (Collingwood). However, the fundamental problem that poses itself to all views of history is whether the past is to be presented and evaluated from the standpoint and the interests, the conditions, media and communication forms, the knowledge and expectations of the *present* or from those of the *past*.<sup>79</sup>

If the perspective is that of the *past*, of its unique experiences and expectations and their lasting effect, the historic perspective may proceed from a deterministic influence of the past on the present, a cause-effect relationship, an “inner cohesion” (Gervinus; von Ranke, qtd. in Uhlig), a “stream of necessity” (Burckhardt 1955, 11) between past and present. Some historians speak of “a sense of reverence for the pastness of the past” and its literary works (Watson 19). A reverence for the past can also spring from the idea that the present is bound to relate to the past, to its otherness and range of possibilities. Heidegger speaks of the necessary “*de-actualization* of

the present” and of history as a “return of the possible” (1959, 391). In general, choosing the viewpoint of the past for the historical stance means choosing the perspective of objectivity and *truth*.

When the *present* becomes the focal point of attention, and the historian does not wish to constitute a one-dimensional logic of origin, causality, and telos, (literary) history can be seen as providing exemplary and genetic meaning. The past becomes the prehistory of the present; it is studied for its “usefulness” or “relevance”. Leavis remarks: “It is only from the present, out of the present, in the present, that you can approach the literature of the past” (68). Unlike the viewpoint of the past, which focuses on truth, the adoption of the present perspective for the historical account entails a conscious distancing, a strictly selective and manipulative viewpoint (and the abandonment of a meta-position, an integrative metaphysical perspective). The past is arranged according to patterns of function and applicability; it is seen as a world of *possibilities* and thus is *aestheticized*. This approach is quite obvious in modernist literature. There the aestheticization of history is an aesthetic (artificial) reconnection of history and meaning, as we will show later.

The aestheticization of history in an aesthetic design is the result of the modern disjunction of history and (rational) meaning; it is also the attempt at their selective and aesthetic re-conjunction (see Uhlig 485). The aesthetic or literary use of history stands in a dialectical relationship to *epistemological* issues. The important point to be made is that these epistemological problems, if they are radicalized, end in an aestheticization of history too. From an epistemological position of relativity, at least four problem areas open up. They can be circumscribed as follows:

(1) The task of the (literary) historian to give an account of the past is first made difficult by the double requirement of *understanding* it and of *explaining* it (for the difference between “understanding” as the method of history, and “explaining” as that of the sciences, see Dilthey 1950; see also Riedel): to revitalize it in empathy and at the same time explicate it. Benedetto Croce argued that we cannot understand bygone times “if we do not recreate and reanimate in ourselves the needs that brought them about” (4). The historian may seek the “rebirth of the past” (Cassirer 1972, 178), but the question arises of how to achieve this reanimation of the past when the present is so different — a difficult enterprise with doubtful

results at best. For this experiential “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer) knowledge of the past is obviously necessary.

(2) This knowledge, however, is made problematic by *epistemological doubt*, doubt in the possibility of resurrecting a past period and its culture by cognitive means, even if based on the most thorough analysis of the sources. Hegel mentioned the incompleteness of the past, Feuerbach and Marx thought this incompleteness an incentive to falsification and mystification, and Nietzsche spoke of suppression and lies; these thinkers thus “brought to a close the unity of dialectical thought with the idea of totality” (Kurrik x). It has become apparent by now that the choices made in the evaluation of the past are determined by personal inclinations, historical circumstances, and the system of thought the historian adheres to, and thus are ideological. Depending on his or her conceptual stand, the literary historian might conceive of the development of literature and the arts as progress (see Adorno 1972; 1969; 1984; Henry James 1957); or as decay (Lukács 1959).

(3) Epistemological doubt has been radicalized into the conviction that the relationship between present and past is always *conceptual* and *constructivist*, and that concepts do not call forth the one and only “truth”, but are fictitious. The mediation between the particular and the general appears to be merely speculative and subject to complementary views and to change. Thus Adorno, emphasizing the problem of the hermeneutic circle, argued that the particular, i.e., the non-conceptual, is “inalienable from the concept” and “disavows the concept’s being-in-itself”, though for him “thinking without a concept is not thinking at all” (1990, 137, 98).

(4) Epistemological doubt and the crisis of universal reason have not only affected the truth status of history but have also opened a gap between *history* and *theory*. Hegel criticized subjectivity as the basis of modernity and attempted to reconcile reason and history on spiritual grounds, by seeing their “double movement” as coming dialectically together in a totality, an Absolute Spirit or Reason, manifesting as well as realizing itself in history. Thus he was able to explain and accept the phenomenon of the new in terms of progress, and at the same time dialectically mediate the new with the old and vice versa. In this way Hegel, however, established only “the self-proximity of infinite subjectivity” (as Derrida, following Nietzsche’s “there is no ‘totality’” [1968, 711], and Heidegger remarked [1976,

24]), leaving open a number of questions about the origin and the rationality of the new, whose sources for Foucault, for example, remain unfathomable by reason. Karl Löwith criticized Hegel's synthesis of reason and history on the grounds that it was an "attempt to translate theology into philosophy and to realize the Kingdom of the Lord in terms of the world's real history [...] as a 'priest of the Absolute'" (58). He instead saw the all-encompassing principles of duration and constancy in history in human (physiological and psychological) "nature", in the anthropological constants. One can, however, turn the problem further around by foregrounding *function* rather than reason or nature. Hans Blumenberg, recognizing the contradictions in modernism but defending the "legitimacy" of the modern age, attempts both to save continuity and to explain its transformative effect in history by setting function in place of substance and speaking of historical change as a "reoccupation" of (constant) cultural positions, as a provision of new answers to old questions, but also as the source of new problems arising from those answers.

In spite of attempts to save the concepts of continuity and universal reason (see Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*), other contemporary theorists have emphasized the contradictions in modernism, among them the dichotomy of history and theory. According to Lévi- Strauss, "a real, absolute history would be [...] confronted with chaos" (296). Collingwood said: "The past is simply non-existent" (101), while Heidegger feared that "time as history has vanished from the lives of all people" (1959, 202). Derrida in *Of Grammatology* calls for the annihilation of history itself: "reading should be free, at least in its axis, from the classical categories of history — not only the categories of the history of ideas and the history of literature but also, and probably above all, from the categories of the history of philosophy" (xxxix). Foucault wrote his *Archaeology of Knowledge* in a spirit of "post-" or "beyond-history", stressing not continuity and totality but discontinuity and difference in history and claiming that his "archeology" establishes "that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history, the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference [...] is the dispersion that we are and make" (131). With the insistence on difference, struggle becomes the decisive category of history, rather than the synthesizing concepts of theory; and

consciousness and spirit (and language) are transferred into the encompassing concept of power (which, of course, makes Habermas Foucault's "natural" opponent). In most influential contemporary positions (even in Habermas), the *possible* gains ground over the actual and the substantial/essential (as it does — in different ways — in Nietzsche's "perspectivism", William James' pragmatism, in Wittgenstein's "language games", Einstein's relativity theory, Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, or the postmodern theory of "determinative chaos"). Foucault, in an interview statement, even goes as far as to say: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth. [...] One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth" (1980, 193). This leads to a position expressed in the English title of Adorno's book *Against Epistemology*. Adorno's negative dialectics recognizes that "unbroken", non-ironic concepts of truth are even apt to turn into tools of domination because "[e]very state of things is horizontally and vertically tied to all others". The very "category of the root, the origin [and one might add, causality] is a category of domination" (Adorno 1990, 267, 255).

This is of course the postmodern stance. Past experience cannot be relived and concepts do not call forth the one and only "truth" but are fictitious, and the synthesizing general idea of what happened appears to be merely speculative and subject to complementary views and change. With relation to history, Kohler in Gass's *The Tunnel* cries out: "What trivial nonsense truths are, how false in fact their elevation. It's a mere name, yes, a flattering designation [...], it's Descartes' deceitful demon" (269). A character in Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon* refers to truth in history with the disillusioned remark: "Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base" (350). "Time is the Space that may not be seen" (326); history appears to be "*Calling into a Void*" (179), "revealing nothing, as it absorbs ev'rything" (179).

Postmodernism, in Jameson's words, has "its peculiar way with time", which leads to "the disappearance of a sense of history" (1983, 118, 125). Postmodernism shows, in Jameson's words, "a

consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality”, and develops what he, following Lacan, calls a “schizophrenic structure” (1992, 54). The loss of the sense of history has also something to do with the opacity of language. If language is the medium that gives us access to the world, to the “experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity” (119), then the clichéness and disorder of language, and the inability of the subject “to accede fully into the realm of speech and language” (118) disrupt the order, the “good” continuity of time (119). The protagonist in Gass’s *The Tunnel* notes that “the study of history is the study of language in one form or another”, because via language “we really fabricate our past” (271). Jorge Luis Borges begins an essay with the statement: “Perhaps the history of the world is the history of a few metaphors”, and he ends it with an even more radical statement: “Perhaps the history of the world is the history of the different intonations of a few metaphors”.<sup>80</sup> Instead of metaphors, Coover cloaks history in numbers, a procedure that again works with constructionist signs. The protagonist in *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* says to his friend Lou Engels: “History. Amazing, how we love it. And did you ever stop to think that without numbers or measurements, there probably wouldn’t be any history?” (49)

### **6.2.2.1. History, Self, Society, and the Aesthetic Design: Gass, Coover, Barth**

Concepts of time are historical phenomena; they cater to “the dream of all men: to re-create Time” (Gass, *Tun* 272). After the weakening of religious dogmas and of the belief in a wise and unchanging nature as a substitute for God, human society erected the tribunal of history to pass judgments on good and evil and to create meaning in terms of origin and goal. The relationship towards time and history was defined by the new experience of the rapid change of the social and personal conditions. Time was already an important theme in the writings of the Renaissance, and the clock had by the eighteenth century become so important that in *Gulliver’s Travels* the Lilliputians surmise that Gulliver’s God is the clock, because he calls it his “oracle, and said it pointed out the time for every action of his

life” (32). An overpowering sense of the breathtaking acceleration of change apparent in the progress of science and technology distinguishes the sense of time in the nineteenth century. J.H. Buckley notes that “as Carlyle suggested, nineteenth-century absorption in time, in the troublous time-element, differed both in kind and degree [from that of the eighteenth century]. The notion of public time, or history, as the medium of organic growth and fundamental change rather than simply additive succession, was essentially new. Objects hitherto apparently stable had begun to lose their old solidity” (*Triumph* 5). In the nineteenth century, however, at least in the early parts of it, private time and collective “social” time still appeared to be readily available and formed a friendly medium in which all conflicts, inner and outer, personal and social, could be alleviated and absorbed through a still unbroken belief in progress and the future.<sup>81</sup> The belief in a good continuation of time towards an ever better economic and social future provided solace for the transitoriness of individual life. Thus in fiction the future of the individual often came to be represented — after the resolution of conflicts — as something known, as a static condition, containing a kind of human eternity in the happy end, often in a place of everlasting contentment that fulfilled desire and absorbed and transcended time (Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*; Disraeli, *Sybil*; Dickens, *Bleak House*; Hardy, *The Return of the Native*).

In modernism, as mentioned, the perspective on time does not arise out of a dualistic, two-dimensional distinction between mechanical and mental time. In modern texts history can be a deadening weight for the self. In Joyce’s *Ulysses* the desolation and bleakness of a merely mechanical course of historical time and the oppression caused by a meaningless past are expressed in the words of Stephen Dedalus: “Time surely would scatter all [...] — History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (42). To avoid the dead weight of history, the one-dimensional logic of temporal sequence and causality, is to be given up in favor of simultaneity of epochs and the freedom of choosing and aestheticizing history for the artistic purposes of art. The aesthetic reconnection of history and meaning is often (as T.S. Eliot said of Joyce’s *Ulysses*) “simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (1923, 157). This is a fabrication of history



that in Joyce's case entails "manipulating a continuous parallel between modernity and antiquity" (157); consciously omitted as decadent are the late developments of Western civilization. This selective method is ultimately based on the (aestheticizing) concept that, in Ezra Pound's radical phrase, "all ages are contemporaneous", and can be montaged at will. The reason for this simultaneity of historical epochs in the human mind is that "we do NOT know the past in chronological sequence but [...] by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time" (1968, 60). This allows modern literary texts to make a selection of history for an aesthetic design that creates *meaning through temporal contrast*. The manipulation of history for contrasting structural purposes marks a first stage in the aestheticization of history; it serves to express the viewpoints, the concerns, and interests of the present in dualistic aesthetic form by either elevating or devaluing the past.

Postmodern fiction then radicalizes this aestheticization of time, which is then liberated from the "usual" forms of sequentiality, causality, and other meaning-giving schemas that restrict and humanize the force of time; it develops new forms of time with the non-organic and non-psychological strategies of fabrication, of montage. In postmodern fiction the perspective on time and history is not dualistic as in modern fiction but multi-perspectival, and includes in true postmodern manner existential, epistemological, ontological, as well as comical, parodic, self-ironizing viewpoints. One is aware of the constructedness and the ambivalence of all time concepts. Fiction can therefore construct the dimension of the past without being obliged to live again through its ideas and values, its deceptions and defeats. This does not exclude a reaction of concern and vigilance in regard to (false) conceptualizations and sentimentalizations of history. These constructions of history and time orient themselves quite "naturally" towards the three crucial aspects of human life, the self, society, and the universe. They can be, and mostly are, of course, combined. (1) When the orientation is towards the self, the perspective is quasi-existential — not existential in the sense that a character is personally suffering under the weight of the history of his or her own country and time and its traditional schemes of order, as in the case of Stephen Dedalus (though the universal aspect of history comes into play there, too) — but in the sense that now, instead of, or in addition to, psychological concerns,

epistemological and ontological uncertainties come to the fore and affect the character's self. Such is Kohler's case in Gass's *The Tunnel*. (2) If the perspective is oriented towards society, the satirical perspective takes note of the false simplifications of history, less from an ethical than from an epistemological or ontological point of view, and replaces them with more complex ones. This is the scenario in Coover's *The Public Burning*. (3) Finally, history as time-structure is adapted to purely aesthetic aims, abstracted from self and society, and, as a means of knowledge, turned against itself by multiplying and reconstructing it. This is Barth's strategy.<sup>82</sup>

In Gass's novel *The Tunnel*, the *existential*, *confessional*, and *epistemological* modes of looking at history combine with relativizing, ironic perspectives. The American historian Kohler attempts to write the "impossible introduction" (155) to his book *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*, but fails in his endeavor to compose a final summation: "Imagine: history not serious enough, causality too comical, chronology insufficiently precise. That's the measure of my turn" (107). He comes to realize that "[w]e were happy because we had no history. [...] Though I was writing what is called history" (108). "History is the abyss of the doomed" (185). He reflects: "there must be an underworld under this world, a concealment of history beneath my exposition of it, a gesture which will symbolize my desperation" (153). The existential gesture expressing his desperation is his digging a tunnel through the earth starting out from the cellar of his home: "My tunnel is my quarrel with the earth. The quarrel is the play, but not the producer" (162). Gass existentializes Kohler's problem as that of his character by dissociating himself from him: "This is Kohler's problem, not mine. [...] When Kohler says his subject is too serious for scholarship, etc., he means it is too personal, that the modes he mentions won't satisfy him. It reflects *his* mood". (Bellamy 1974, 35.) Yet postmodern fiction has its problems with this, *his* mood, with the confessional mode, because the latter has a "realistic" note and is, as it were, one-dimensional. Gass himself describes the problem: "It's the true-confession I suspect. The ME. I was THERE. And what was THERE? ME! Wholly unprofessional. Totally inartistic. The so-called confessional mode has an immediate rhetorical power [...] which is fake, cheap. In these works the subject matter does your work for you, but the aesthetic qualities are all left out. So the problem is to

get *in* the confessional mode, take *away* the confessional power, and reclaim that power in the language” (LeClair and McCaffery 165-66).

Gass broadens the confessional mode also beyond the problem of language, by making history an epistemological problem. Kohler is incapable of isolating reasons for what happened under the Nazis, to establish uni-logical chains of causality. He always has to face the simultaneity of mutually exclusive determinants, and thus is unable to confront meaningfully the crucial epistemological, ethical, and ontological questions, including the question of the meaning of history and the vicissitudes of “the world”. Gass “reclaims” the “confessional power” for his book by distinguishing fiction’s concern with particularity (the confessional mode) from history’s task of analyzing the universal. This makes Kohler an artist adverse to generalizations. In Gass’s words: “History, as I see it, can strive for the universal. My objection to it is simply that it rarely, reasonably, does. [...] For me fiction isn’t an alternative to anything [...], and it doesn’t strive for universals. It merely makes particular things out of universals” (Bellamy 1974, 35).

While Gass has a problem with the confessional mode, and therefore “takes away” its power only to “reclaim” it after broadening its scope, Coover has his difficulties with bringing to history the *social-critical* mode and its value-consciousness. For one, postmodern epistemological and ontological uncertainties, the concomitant attitudes of contradiction and paradox, as well as the narrative strategies of multiplicity and simultaneity do not allow a linear and univalent understanding of history, which would be necessary for satire. Furthermore, the blurring of borderlines between reality and fiction makes all concepts and interpretations of history fictitious, while satire relies on a “realistic” base for its critique. But this is not all. The situation is rather complex. Though historical explanations can be manipulated as part of power games and thus are open to satire, society’s interpretative maneuvers in general in fact aim also at a consoling framework of historical coherence and continuity for everybody. Yet the attempt to give duration to ideas and interpretations, independent of historical change, turns these notions into clichés. The reintroduction of these clichés into the actual world with which they clash transposes the stereotypes of belief into acts of violence. The writer, facing history under ethical

auspices, thus has a triple problem. The first problem is, to use Gass's terms, "to get in" the social-critical mode, in spite of all complications and complexities. The second arises out of the necessity of taking away the one-dimensional judgmental power of social criticism, and of opening it to epistemological questions and personal anxieties. Finally, the third problem lies in the difficulty then to reclaim the critical power of satire. This layering of aspects is obviously a very strenuous task. It can only be achieved by the fantastification of the world, which takes the text out of the ruts of one-dimensional realism and its mimetic goals. It further needs the conceptualization of history as both cliché and myth, in order to be able to perspectivize it in multiple terms, in the ironic, satiric, and comic modes. It also requires the existential approach because clichés and myths are expressions of the fear of people and communities, the fear of emptiness, meaninglessness, and the void. A sensitive character, who is right in the middle of the power structure and has access to the data and is affected by the discrepancy between clichéd belief and the factual social and political world, could best both reflect and dramatize the complexity of the situation. The historical dimension thus adds to ethical scruples epistemological doubt, or rather, strengthens the latter, whose concern with "truth" makes satire (which requires a clear-cut value system) a very complex affair.

These are the problems that Coover faces in *The Public Burning*, a novel about the Rosenberg trial, the conviction of husband and wife as Soviet spies and their execution in a burlesque/fantastic scene on Times Square. Coover quite consciously chooses a historical "boundary-situation" (Jasper) that can be dramatized. For him "the execution of the Rosenbergs had been a watershed event in American history which we had somehow managed to forget or repress. [...] but it was important that we remember it [...] or else it can happen again and again (LeClair and McCaffery 77- 78). His attitude towards history cannot but be ambivalent, in fact is double-poled: "it's a kind of confrontation with History, the liberal dogma of History, its sacrosanct nature borrowed from the authority of the Bible, it's also a kind of enhancement of it, a celebration, a deep respect for the moment itself, which I'm trying to make more vivid, more memorable — more 'real,' as it were" (Ziegler and Bigsby 91). The result is that *The Public Burning* "was

made up of thousands and thousands of tiny fragments that had to be painstakingly stitched together. [...] It was like a gigantic impossible puzzle" (LeClair and McCaffery 75). Since, in social terms, history is one of "the constructs that bind a group together" (Gado 155), Coover was "striving for a text that would seem to have been written by the whole nation throughout its history, as though the sentences had been forming themselves all this time, accumulated toward this experience (LeClair and McCaffery 75-76).

The media, especially "Time Magazine", "the National Poet Laureate" (*PB* 6) of America, and The New York Times, expressing the "Spirit of History", Coover sees as writing, interpreting, and falsifying history in order to simplify and manipulate complexity for the people but also to write on against the "terrible flux". The New York Times and others reconstruct history "with words and iconography each fleeting day in the hope of discovering some pattern, some coherence, some meaningful dialogue with time", though "[t]here are sequences but no causes, contiguities but no connections" (*PB* 191, 190). The need for patterns and myths as organizational matrices is filled by dualities, the "Manichean struggle" "between the sons of light and the sons of darkness" (150), the mythic Uncle Sam, "maker and shaper of world history" (263), and his mythic antagonist, the Phantom (from the world of communism), who has prompted the Rosenbergs to their trespass, allegedly has instigated a world-encompassing plot, and has "*altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country!*" (25) To further complicate the perspectives, Coover then "wanted someone who lived inside the mythology, accepting it, and close to the center, yet not quite in the center, off to the edge a bit, an observer", who was "a self-conscious character" and who "has to analyze everything, work out all the parameters [...], worries about things" with a "somewhat suspicious view of the world". Vice-president Nixon "proved ideal" (LeClair and McCaffery 74-75). The fact that Nixon, who is near the center of the power system and narrates half the chapters, becomes increasingly aware of the complexities of history, the falseness of ideologies, and the problematics of distinguishing between right and wrong, adds a questioning and confessional note and also a comical touch to the book.<sup>83</sup>

Another way to approach history in the postmodern novel is to start not with ethical problems but with *epistemological*

uncertainties. The multivalence and constructedness of history liberates the imagination from the fixity of uni-logical truths and gives occasion to *play with possibilities* of interpretation and evaluation. This is what Barth does. In his own words, we can turn “the adjective weight of accumulated history [...] against itself to make something new and valid” (*LF* 106). He says that “the use of historical or legendary material, especially in a farcical spirit, has a number of technical virtues, among which are aesthetic distance and counter-realism” (Bellamy 1974, 10). This distancing attitude entails the refusal to accept historical facts as such and to believe in the standard versions of history, which are complemented with, and replaced by, other versions because they are every bit as true as those in the history textbooks.<sup>84</sup> Maintaining as frames of reference the dialectics of cause and effect, good and evil, truth and falsity, time and timelessness, Barth plays with them, as he does with the “facts”, because “[t]he sum of history” is “no more than the stuff of metaphors” (Bellamy 1974, 11, cf. Borges). Since “[f]act is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world” (*Ch* 256), Barth invents in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, in addition to Captain Smith’s official narrative, the latter’s secret diary, *The Secret Historie of the Voiage Up the Bay of Chesapeake*, which claims to relate the “true” events of Smith’s encounters with the Indians and also the true facts of the Pocahontas legend. In addition to this, he creates a diary of Smith’s companion Burlingame, senior, *The Privie Journall of Sir Henry Burlingame*, which again corrects Captain Smith’s versions. In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, and *Chimera*, time expands to include linear and cyclical concepts of time, history and myth and the concepts of myth, all of which are playfully unmasked as mere (language) constructions and yet at the same time made use of for aesthetic, operational purposes, so to speak “under erasure” (Derrida), as matrices of the narrative, in fact as form, held in unstable balance with the force of correction and superimposition. And in the extensive network of relations, mythic and historical, cyclical and linear models of time are re-connected to personal time. The gain is a *dramatic* perspective evolving from the personal struggle of the protagonists with the past or with pastness, and from the necessity to overcome it. The operational pattern is repetition, or rather, *re-enactment* of the past:

any historical or mythic past that haunts, craps up, fertilizes the present is an emblem of our personal past. The theme, certainly of the Perseus story, certainly of the Bellerophon story, and most certainly of the work in progress [*LETTERS*], is the comic, tragic, or paradoxical re-enactment of the past in the present. Perseus, for example, in the *Chimera*, attempts systematically to re-enact a past which, at the time, was unselfconscious and heroic. At the midpoint of his life, after he has accomplished the heroic paradigm, Perseus recognizes that he has in fact fulfilled the prerequisites of mythic heroism. And then, at a point where he feels himself stagnating, he attempts a program of rejuvenation by re-enacting his heroic past. Of course, one can't do that: he comes a cropper and finally has to arrive at his new equilibrium or transcension by a different route from the one that made him a mythic hero in the first place. Bellerophon attempts to become a mythic hero by perfectly imitating the actuarial program for mythic heroes. Of course, that doesn't work, and he finds that by perfectly imitating the model of mythic heroism, what he becomes is a perfect imitation of a mythic hero — which is not the same thing as a mythic hero. My characters in the new novel will act out, whether they know it or not, Marx's notion that historical events and personages recur, the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce. This is also what happens to Perseus in *Chimera*: his attempts to re-enact his heroic past becomes farcical, a fiasco. It is only when he reassesses the situation (with the help of Calyxa and eventually with Medusa) that he is able to elevate his re-enactment into something greater: which, if not heroic, is at least more personally successful (Ziegler and Bigsby 25).

Barth aims at the “*coincidentia oppositorum*” (LeClair and McCaffery 28); but the protagonists fail at the endeavor to attain synthesis. This failure, however, opens space for (self)irony and the comic and parodic perspectives. No real and lasting synthesis is possible because there is always “a qualification of attitudes so that attitudes have their counterattitudes” (LeClair and McCaffery 17). This gives occasion both for dramatization and ironization. Attitudes of the tragic and the comic or the farcical are set against one another, as are the two models of the past, the linear and the historical, the cyclical and the mythic. “[T]he vicissitudes of a wandering hero” (Ziegler and Bigsby 28) offer the author the opportunity to qualify attitudes with counterattitudes. The wandering hero balances his life between pattern (past) and individuality (present), which makes for further tension. Barth extends the notion of re-enactment of the past to the re-use of characters from previous novels, for instance, in *LETTERS*. This model of re-enactment also includes the literary sensibilities and strategies of the past. Barth says that “*The Sot-Weed Factor* was composed, along with all the other reasons, with certain

things in mind about the history of the novel, including the history of my own novels". He felt his hands "tied by the history of the genre" so that "you would almost have to be parodying the genre in some respect to bring it off" (Bellamy 1974, 6-7).

### 6.2.2.2. Presentism and Nomadism

The opacity of the past and the inability of the self to make it meaningful can lead to the loss of personal and collective history; the flow of time is reduced to the *present*. History then is seen to consist in "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" (Jameson 1983, 125). Considered from a transhuman perspective, this is a liberation of the force of time from the human schemes of order. From a human standpoint it is both a threat to human control and a challenge to the imagination to enlarge its scope. In negative terms, the denial of temporal order impairs the sequential narrative structure and de-individualizes the fictional character by the deprivation of continuity, which leaves a vacuum. Under the condition of presentism, the writer and the character either face the loss of the past without emotion, or they deplore the loss as an amputation of the narrative and the self. Beckett's *The Unnamable* has no definable plot, no namable character, no describable setting and no chronological time flow. In the performance of a continuous present tense, not bound by the past, by memory, or by "facts", the "I, [...] of whom I know nothing" (304) pushes on to ever-new limits of apprehension. For Borges, "the present is indefinite [...] the future has no reality other than as a present hope [...] the past has no reality other than as a present memory" (*Lab* 10). Federman writes in *Surfiction*: "In the fiction of the future, all distinctions [...] between the past and the present [...] will be abolished. All forms of duplicity will disappear" (8). Robbe-Grillet says that time in his texts "seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything" (1966, 155, 122). Sukenick notes: "[r]eality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist". Burroughs remarks that "[t]here is only one thing a writer can write about: *what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing ... I am a recording instrument. ... I do not presume to impose 'story' 'plot' 'continuity'* (*NL* 221). The ideal authors for such novels of presentism would be the extra-terrestrial Tralfamadorians in



Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* who live in a state of affirmation without question. For them time "does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment" (86), the reason being that "in fact this moment simply is [... .] There is no *why*" (66).

By living in a fragmented time, a "series of perpetual presents", the fictional character loses the sense of a coherent self. Already Camus's absurd man does not permit himself belief "in the profound meaning of things", but rather lives during his "day-to-day revolt" solely in the "succession of presents" (54, 41, 47). One of Borges' characters questions the state of the self in terms of time and memory: "Who was I? Today's self, bewildered, yesterday's, forgotten; tomorrow's, unpredictable?" (qtd. in D. Harvey 41) This is what Barthelme calls the advent of "pastless, futureless man" (41). In *Snow White*, it is said: "[o]ur becoming is done. We are what we are. Now it is just a question of rocking along with things as they are until we are dead". (128). The Reverend Furber in Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* notes: "So it is with us. So it is with me. [...] Buried in this air, I rot. Moment by moment, I am not the same" (201). The narrator of Gass's *Mrs. Mean* says: "I am no image, on my porch — no symbol. I don't exist" (113). In Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, Jan Fain, who is an alienated observer of the fragmented world and the fragmented self says: "I have lost my sense of the whole. I wait for events to take a form" (148). The Genie in Barth's "Dunyazadiad" remarks: "I lost track of who I am" (*Ch* 18). Failing to make sense of history, Kohler in Gass's *The Tunnel*, notes: "I always am, and never was" (109). Burlingame in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* speaks of personality as a "Heraclithean flux" (204); and in Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, the narrator says "that consciousness [...] was a [mere] succession of separate particles being carried along on the surface of the deep and steady unconscious flow of life, of time itself [...]" (58), the flow of life and time being beyond grasp or articulation. In Elkin's *The Dick Gibson Show*, Dick, in the author's own words, is a "bodiless being" (LeClair and McCaffery 121). Dick claims that "the voice is the sound of the soul", but his soul is as much a void as the air, into which an imagined community of listeners wail and scream their compulsive confessions, private fears and self-obsessed questions. Ben Flesh in Elkin's *The Franchiser* "is deprived of all warrants of

personality”, “has in lieu of a life” (282) a function as the connector of all the knots on the map that mark his franchises. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Slothrop suffers a complete loss of time and identity and simply disappears from the text.

The exclusion of past and history as structuring features of time entails a loss of breadth and depth not only in character, but also in plot and narrative structure, making time infinite, without beginning and end. In Italo Calvino’s *Winter’s Night*, “the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears” (*WNT* 13). Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar* makes time appear to stand still in a state of complete devitalization. The loss of the “dream of all men: to re-create Time” (*Tun* 272) means also the loss of the bond between the present and the future. The impossibility of “fabricat[ing] our past” (*Tun* 271) includes the impossibility of fabricating our future. The anticipation of the future (sometimes in the guise of reconstructing the myths of the past), is curtailed either to preconceptions of *catastrophe*, i.e., apocalypse (Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*), or the expectation of inertia, a state of spent energy, of *entropy* (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Gaddis, *JR*), or the anticipation of emptiness, for, in Gass’s phrase, “[o]n the other side of a novel lies the void” (*OL* 49). Since cutting off a meaningful past and a future that gives hope leaves only the present open, the present has to bear all the weight of making sense and must not end. Completion means finality and death. The text, by abandoning the unilinear logic of causality and finality and by replacing them with multiplicity, indeterminacy and immanence, aims at incompleteness and *limitlessness*, at the imaginary, continuous movement, the flow of time, the creation of an infinite variety of possible worlds — in short, the filling of the threatening vacuum.

Nevertheless, what Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault perceive in presentism is not merely a loss of form but also a gain of force. In Deleuze’s terms, the heterogeneous lines of force create continuous change and transcend the stasis of segmentarity by a new “nomadism”, which is a new mobility, a new presentism. The imagination works along these heterogeneous lines of force and transfers nomadism into the text. Though it is said in Barth’s “Echo”, that “[o]vermuch presence appears to be the story-teller’s problem”

(*LF* 98) — namely the problem of repetition and filling the blanks — the presentness of time offers a great chance to affirm the *force of openness*. This presupposes two things, the realization and acceptance of the two aspects of time: its fundamental openness and its constructedness by human perspectives. Inspiration does not come from the humanizing structures of time but from Deleuze's second form of time, *aion*, pre-individual and impersonal time, the temporal vacancy out of which everything that exists takes its origin. This is the time of freedom, force, and the imagination and of art's singularity, and it rejects the first form of time, *chronos*, chronological time, and its traditional concepts and categorizations that produce closure. Form is not derived from these preconceived fixed patterns of time that deny the fundamental openness of time, but from imaginative constructions that are variable, fluid, replaceable, can be perspectivized and are the equivalent to the "nomadic" existence of the character in a realm of possibilities. This opens the text to a wide variety of *aestheticizations* of time, which are double-coded in the sense that they represent the openness, i.e., the force of time, in their own energetic transformations, and at the same time give this force form by opening succession to simultaneity, by applying (multiple) perspectives of evaluation to time, and by playing with gaps and blanks, thus creating incongruities, which in the controlling form paradoxically, however, again represent the uncontrollable force of time. In its deconstructive and reconstructive activities, this creative process is ultimately not a negation but an affirmation of the force of time, affirmation in the sense of what Derrida calls a "Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (1978, 292).

In postmodern fiction, the aestheticization of time can no longer rely, as modernism does, on the contrast between past and present or on their meaningful mental fusion. History is neither simply a weight on nor an enrichment of the present and its potential of meaning. It is neutral and perspectival. By replacing "strong" meta-concepts of imposed order like origin, continuity, causality, and teleology with more "tolerant" and "weaker" ones like simultaneity, discontinuity, complementarity, complexity, and possibility, the

ground is laid for reconstructions of history, as demanded by Nietzsche and Heidegger and then, among others, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard (see also Carroll 1987). Guided by the “weaker” notions of time, which deconstruct the “strong” dualities that dominate traditional and modern thought, the imagination gains a new positive angle on time, on its liberating possibilities in terms of non-generalized and non-generalizable *difference*. Difference is closely related to simultaneity; it in fact both creates the simultaneity of possibilities and makes room for the force of time in the singularity of energetic things that elude and exclude the form-giving generalizations of time. Difference is here not only a language phenomenon in terms of Saussure and Derrida (the signifier’s only gaining significance by its difference from other signifiers), but rather the rescue of the particular and its source of energy from the general by putting the singular and distinct outside the chain of linear time, history, and causality, and the other rational categorizations. Foucault writes his *Archaeology of Knowledge* in a spirit of “post-” or “beyond-history”, stressing not continuity and totality but discontinuity and difference in history and claiming that his “archeology” establishes “that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference [...] is the dispersion that we are and make” (131).

Difference as strategy of decenterment and de-generalization makes history and character manipulable and subjectable to a variety of deconstructive and non-generalizing reconstructive perspectives. Since the paradigms of thought create systems of differentiation, difference calls up its opposite, sameness, almost automatically. But sameness again calls up difference. In addition to what sameness means as that which is alike, it, at least implicitly, designates a lack of energy, a reification of time, a veritable standstill and loss of vitality, so that the fiction can play with both difference and sameness, and make both express force against form. Difference affirms force; sameness affirms force *ex negativo*, by calling up the “other”, in spite of its “minus function”. Time is reified in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* by its actualizing only the visual surface of things, but the rigid, opaque surface suggests *ex negativo* difference, passion, jealousy. Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar* devitalizes time by having sameness reign, the sameness of harmony without

difference and passion, but difference and love stir under the surface, and violence appears directly when a group of people kill themselves publicly in protest against paralyzing sameness. And in Barthelme's *Snow White*, the stifling sameness and boredom of the ordinary necessarily call up the vision of, and the wish for, the excitement of the extraordinary. The result in all three cases is a pattern of presence and absence, in which the missing dimension of time and life (past, present, future; vitality and energetics) and the absent pole of the paradigm difference vs. sameness either appear "under erasure" or articulate themselves as desire for the other.

### 6.2.2.3 Multiplications of Times: Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

In the representation of temporality, difference is the difference of discourses of time, of the discourses of past, present, and future, of empty time and chronological time, of linear and cyclical time, of "mechanical" and mental time, all of which are, of course, constructions, masks of time; they draw for their compositions on a "pool" of human discourses of time. The complex postmodern texts of, say, Barth, Coover, Pynchon, attain their form from a grid of such discourses of time, which lead to an unprecedented manifoldness and complication of temporality, and, as a result of this complexity of time versions, establish what is called "spatial form", the simultaneity of (mutually exclusive) rivaling historical, mythical and existential notions of time which create a pattern of incongruity, of contradiction, of paradox. The latter is the imaginary form of the always-masked force of time. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is a model case.<sup>85</sup> Joining modern and postmodern traits, the text combines public and personal history, interrelated in such a way that the resources of multiplicity and simultaneity are endlessly extended. History is on the one hand "sterile history — a known past, a projectable future" (126); then this "history [is] at best a conspiracy, not always among gentlemen, to defraud". What is taught in school is, "[h]istory as sequences of violence, battle after battle"; hidden is the fact that "the real business of the War is buying and selling [... ;] The true war is a celebration of markets" (105). But then a serial notion of history intervenes. Rather early in the book the question is asked: "Will Postwar be nothing but 'events,' newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?"

(56) This entropic, beyond-history view of time, a destructive mode of presentism, is spatially presented in the description of the Midworks in the concentration camp Dora where the V2 was produced, and where “All the objects have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, terminal evening. [...] when there is no more History”. Though time is destructive, time and history provide “personal density” (509) for Slothrop, the protagonist. The loss of past and future, of personal density, then “scatters” him, makes him disappear from the novel.<sup>86</sup>

Linearity of time and history is complemented with cyclicity of time and myth. A mythical center is what the Herero Enzian, one of the central characters of the book “wants to create”; it “will have no history. It will never need a design change. Time, as time is known to the other nations, will wither away inside this new one” (318-19). But this new time as duration and center is set inside the dark mythical stages of history that the Hereros and their legends represent; it is already ironized and devaluated by the language used (“Erdschweinhöhle”), and by the fact that the mythical *place* of the past is substituted for present time and used to deactivate and thus reify time, a fact that appears to be a regression: “The Erdschweinhöhle will not be bound, like the Rocket, to time. The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place” (319). Yet then a further complication occurs. The timeless mythical notion of the Hereros circles back to time-filled history and establishes a parallel to the Rocket whose relation to the Hereros is manifold.

On the one hand, the rocket is first made to parallel Herero history, which is a history without logic and reason (without reason for their almost-extinction by von Trotha’s punitive expedition). On the other hand, a direct (and ironic) parallel between the mythic quality of the “Erdschweinhöhle” and the Rocket is established. This is possible because the rocket is a kind of myth too, a modern myth meant to overcome time in space: “To integrate here is to operate on a rate of change so that time falls away: change is stilled” (301). In fact, the half-circular trajectory of the rocket’s flight connects it with the cosmic serpent. It is subject to gravity, but is “not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it ‘rises from’ land the Earth it ‘strikes’ [...] It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And

Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it's only the *peak* that we are allowed to see" (726). Lyle Bland, a character in the text, notes the mythical component that adheres to gravity, namely "that Gravity, taken so for granted, is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth's mindbody" (590). The Rocket and the concept of gravity come to signify the uncontrollable, indefinable; gravity is the symbol of Earth's power and the process of life, of nature's anti-mechanistic stance, and beneficial influence, the cyclicity of nature's organic process. Gravity appears to the "System's" adherents as something demonic, the medium of resistance against "Their" rationalistic linearity of thought and action, because it comes "out of the other silent world", symbolizing *aion*, the pool of time, and the natural power of cyclical renewal.

Time in *Gravity's Rainbow* remains ultimately non-patternable, i.e., non-humanizable. Simultaneity and plurality, incongruity and gaps establish a form of time's force that counters old forms, sequentiality, succession, and rational logic, and denies "an ordered sense of history and time prevailing against chaos" (216). The novel is in fact a sum-total of what time can be in postmodern fiction. This includes the potential human reaction to time's masks. The characters come to see that Life is the ultimate frame of reference (in contrast to society and history), that "life's single lesson" is that "there is more accident to it than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane" (300). Anti- or posthumanistic thought tends to allot to men and women at most a place as equals among other equals in the universe. The force of time, unchecked by restraints, is received by humans as openness, which, however, is not bearable for long, though it opens chances for renewal; it is perceived as contingency, invalidating the ordering categories of the mind; and it appears as cyclicity of time, overruling individual existence and against which both human history and the individual human being have to assert themselves as form if they want to constitute order in time and the core of the self. The imposition of form on openness, contingency and cyclicity, however, leads to rationalization and categorization of time, of life and of society by the system. This also causes the de-individualization of the self, in this case not by chaos but by social schemes, rational structure and clichéd beliefs.

The problem is that there is not only a conflict between form and force of time, between closure and openness, but that different

kinds or dimensions of time-force both connect and clash, in terms of movement and simultaneity, cyclicity and contingency. The human being is subject to all their influences, but as an individual has to make sense of them by coping primarily with the irreversible and end-directed force of movement of time to which he or she is irrevocably subjected. This is the source of *drama*, of desire, of feeling and thought — less of action, since action needs the freedom of the will, which is not given. There is no way to avoid tension; in Barth's words, "take linear plot, take resolution of conflict, take third direct object, all that business, they may very well be obsolete notions, [...] but in fact we still lead our lives by clock and calendar, for example, and though the seasons recur our mortal human time does not; we grow old and tired, we think of how things used to be or might have been and how they are now, and in fact, and in fact we get exasperated and desperate and out of expedients and out of words" (*LF* 109). The existential task for both character and narrator is the balancing of the flow of time by forms that make sense, without abolishing the heterogeneity of time and life. The protagonists of the novel accept the task, only then to fail in it, since the dominance of form entails the suppression of force, and the dominance of force means chaos, and both lead to entropy, which leaves the human being stranded between the force and form of time. Many of the struggles of ideas in postmodern fiction, especially in Pynchon, concern the relationship between the ideas of force and those of form, the notions of the random and the structured, the open and the closed, life's circularity or repetition and the human effort to make the linearity of life meaningful. Interestingly enough, it is the anti-formalist Sukenick who sketches the problem and gives reasons for the need of form. By comparing improvisation, old-fashioned form, and new formalism, he sketches a general development in postmodern fiction:

Improvisation releases you from old forms, stale thoughts [...] It prevents you from writing clichéd formulas. It's a release, finally, a release of the imagination. Today, however, I think, that the idea of improvisation itself has become a formula and it has gotten very slack as a result. The novel got tired of improvisation in the beginning of the '70s. At least it did for me. Presently I seem to be moving in the direction of formalism — the kind of formalism that I think Coover and Abish are using. Another example is the sort of thing Federman used in *The Voice in the Closet*, in



which you simply impose a form on your materials, it not really mattering how this form was generated (LeClair and McCaffery 291).

The most important narrative strategy in the struggle between force and form has always been plot. In postmodern fiction it is reinstated, i.e., imposed on the material or elicited from it, which in Pynchon is the same thing, since the result is in both cases arbitrary. Or, plot is reduced to mere succession.

### **6.2.3. The Linear Sequence of Plot, Succession As The Simultaneity of Possibilities**

#### **6.2.3.1. Versions of Plot**

Succession forms itself as plot, and plot degenerates into succession. Simultaneity is a narrative technique that strives for pluri-signification and the dominance of possibility over actuality. The dominance of *simultaneity* is attained by expanding time into infinity or opening the single situation to a multiplicity of perspectives, by interrelating situations, positions, values, or by fusing situations, characters, positions in a manner that overlays them or blends them into one. Within fiction's labyrinth (a metaphor that Borges, Barth and Pynchon make the signum of their narratives) simultaneity and succession form the structure of *winding or bifurcating paths* (Borges). These paths suggest succession of steps forward or backward and offer at the same time a simultaneity of choices, contrastive and endless possibilities of turning, branching out, following up, seeking for a goal; they are labyrinthine, lead into ever new repetitions and variations, reversals and exhaustions without end. The salient feature of postmodern fiction is that all three, (structured) plot, mere succession, and simultaneity, combine, rival with, and relativize one another in what has been called "spatial form". This is partly true already of modern texts. Gass says about Joyce: "He wants an experience that can happen only when the reader moves constantly about the book. The notion of the space in which this kind of book is constructed is quite different from the notion of the time through which the Fielding work moves" (LeClair and McCaffery 26).

Plot in narrative is a construct of order; its form is directed by theme. Its function is to structure narrative. This role has been

questioned since modernism. Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson, for instance, turn against plot as a well-regulated, meaningful system of social and narrative order and try to destabilize and decompose it so that it does not gain dominance over character, but rather, if necessary or pertinent, grows out of the quest for identity and truth. Postmodern writers (e.g., Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute) have been skeptical of traditional plot, arguing against it along “metaphysical”, aesthetic, or social lines. Plot, character, and omniscient narrator are “obsolete notions based on metaphysical assumptions that are no longer applicable” (Bellamy 1974, 14). As Hawkes notes in an often-quoted statement: “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme” (Dembo and Pondrom 11). Sukenick, writing about the “new tradition” in fiction, states somewhat provocatively, though nonetheless in all seriousness: “Needless to say the Bossa Nova has no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence” (1975b, 43). For Federman, “[t]he plot having disappeared, it is no longer necessary to have the events of fiction follow a logical sequential pattern (in time and space)” (1975, 10). As mentioned, Burroughs sees himself as “a recording instrument ... do[es] not presume to impose ‘story’ ‘plot’ ‘continuity’” (*NL* 221). Kosinski asks “Is there a plot?” and answers, “[a] plot, a sense of destiny, is provided for us by family tradition, by society, by a political party or by our own indoctrinated imagination. The plot is given by outsiders”, while in fact “our lives are not based on a single plot; nor, for that matter, is our fiction” (Bellamy 1974, 160, 163). For his part, Elkin is a bit more ambivalent: “I admire [...] a writer like Iris Murdoch, whose novels are superbly plotted. I admire a writer like William Trevor, whose novels are masterpieces of plot. An attention to writing ought not to exclude an attention to plot. In my case it does” (Sanders 143).

Plot has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Critics have sought its frame of reference outside or inside the text. Jameson locates its basis outside the text, in the social world. The fiction of realist and even modernist writers “persuades us in concrete fashion that human action, human life, is somehow a complete, interlocking whole, a single, formed, meaningful substance [...] Our satisfaction with the completeness of plot is therefore a kind of satisfaction with society as well” (Jameson 1971, 12). Peter Brooks argues on a

psychological level and finds the framework for plot again outside narrative, in Freud's concept of the unconscious; its "investments, movements, and discharges of energies [... are] the place of drives or instincts in conflict, a basic dualism whence comes its permanent driving force"; "desire", is the "motor of narrative". Plot being the "dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse", it is therefore "the play of desire in time" (42, 52, 13, xiii). Structural narratologists (e.g., Breton, Greimas), on the other hand, have argued from the inside of narrative, considering plot the controlling structure of narrative, its regulating and rationalizing power. The discussion has remained controversial. While, as we will see, postmodern writers either negate the rationalizing power of plot or re-interpret it with regard to the new, deconstructive tendencies in fiction, M.-L. Ryan in 1991 re-makes plot into the most general feature of narrative, emphasizing the rational and intelligible, unifying and uniform aspects of narrative rather than its hybridity and impurity, discontinuity and multiplicity — traits, which are specifically important for the postmodern writer.

The focus has definitely shifted in postmodern fiction towards non-plot. Nevertheless, though it is true that, in Barth's words, not "everything works out and resolves itself in the end" (Bellamy 1974, 14), plot still has its function. There are two arguments to bring it back in. Both are aesthetic reasonings. Barth maintains that "if you reject these devices on those grounds" — namely that "the age of the plotted novel belongs to the age" when "the writer's audience believed in some kind of destiny or fate that saw that things worked out" — then

you're operating from an absolutely realist argument. It would be the premises of realism, in other words, that would object to a literary convention for those reasons [...] But another way to address that state of affairs is to regard fiction as artifice in the first place. And if you acknowledge and embrace the artificial aspect of art, which you can't get rid of anyway, then it doesn't necessarily follow, for example, that you have to abandon certain kinds of literary devices simply because they're metaphors for notions that are no longer viable. If you are working in the comic mode, you may be free *ipso facto* to make use of all sorts of conventions [also the character] because you're parodying them [...] you can exploit the outmoded conventions for all they're worth to get certain things done that you just can't get done in any other way (Bellamy 1974, 14-15).

The other argument starts out from a textual point of view, from the linearity of the text. It opposes the identification of plot and rational order and sees plot as growing out of the temporal process of narrative, its succession and fluctuating organization, the endless production of difference, the multiple proliferation and scattering of structures, the pluralizing of all forms. Plot is then not so much a means of imposing order on that which has none, a narrative form, but a primal narrative force, resulting from the (undisciplined) continuity (not the logical/causal regulation) of situations. It is form invaded by force or force producing form. Its being form *and* force makes the term itself ambivalent. This doubleness shows in the writers' utterances. Sukenick, for example, says in an interview, "I don't see my life in terms of sequential events, in terms of progress. So I don't see my life in terms of plot, or of an advance" (58); and he notes with regard to fiction that "[t]hings don't appear to happen according to Aristotle any more" (1985, 139), obviously because the traditional plot-paradigms seem to be exhausted; yet he also writes that every detail in the text still shows "how events conspire. It indicates a plot. The job of intelligence is to uncover [not impose] this plot. [...] As you can see everything falls into place" (Sukenick, *Out* 124-25). Though Frank Kermode states that "all [...] plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning" (46), plot in postmodern fiction almost always plays back and forth between form and force, order and disorder, loosening the boundary lines and mostly refusing to come to an end that bestows "upon the whole duration and meaning".

Being double-poled as force and form, plot can be interpreted in the one or the other direction. But as Sukenick's remark indicates, it can no more disappear from narrative than can the elements of the situation, space, time, character, action/event, which continue through the narrative without break-off and from which plot originates as an uneven configuration in flux. In Barth's words: "Plot and theme: notions vitiated by this hour of the world but as yet not successfully succeeded" ("Title", *LF* 102). Plot is not abolishable, not because the writer has to impose it on the narrative as a clarifying diagram, but because the plot constitutes *itself* out of the consecutiveness of situations which narrative inevitably builds.<sup>87</sup> Plot in postmodern fiction is obviously determined by the fact that narrative leans towards the force pole, empowered by desire and

narrative energy that create difference rather than logical coherence, difference also as simultaneity of the different, as the combination of temporal and “spatial” form. In fact, the greatest postmodern novels — like Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* — attain their vitality from their experimenting with the interaction of time-following and time-breaking strategies. Barth himself would like “to have it both ways”, “to find a way to assimilate what’s gone before us in the twentieth century — Joyce, Beckett, Borges, and the rest — and yet tell stories, which is an agreeable thing to do” (Bellamy 1974, 5). The question of course is how to do it, how to come up with an organized linearity of narrative without getting into the rationality of plot in the traditional sense. Barth’s answer, which would be shared by most of his colleagues, does not help much, though it points in the most acceptable direction, that of narrative movement: “The process is the content, more or less” (10); the “more or less” would have to be stressed. Gass would not be happy with such a view, because he is “interested in the finished product. [...] But there are lots of writers, many of whom I admire, who regard the finished work as simply a byproduct of the activity of composition. [...] The danger is that, by emphasizing process over product, you escape judgment” (LeClair and McCaffery 31). Plot is placed between process and product, uncertainty and judgment. The different ways plot appears and disappears in postmodern fiction are summed up in the following rough overview. It will also provide a clearer view of the role of succession and simultaneity with which we will deal separately at the end of this chapter.

(1) In a story/essay called “Plot”, Elkin interconnects plot and character. Plot in fact grows out of desire and the resistance to desire:

[P]lot, after all, is everywhere. A condition almost of grammar itself, it comes, as it were, with the territory of personality, pronouns and proper names. [...] Plot is simply the unity between what character desires and how it seeks to satisfy those desires. It is a closed community of intention that can be dissolved only by success or resignation. [...] Say plot is a merging of two positions: What I want and what wants me. Obsession on the one hand, resistance on the other [...] Plot’s soul is double then. What the character wants to happen and what he does *not* want to happen. Order and process arise from the first principle, and plot’s good fun, its suspense and excitement and surprise from the second, each hand striving to be uppermost. I don’t just mean conflict though, I mean *fleshed* conflict. Plot

must have its reasons. Indeed, it *is* its reasons. What Aristotle calls 'soul,' I would call *bi-partisan* soul, split theme. Motive must exist on both sides, the character's and the world's. Plot would be the sum of these disparate motives (73-74).

This play between the force of desire and the force of resistance is the theme of books like *The Dick Gibson Show*, *The Franchiser*, and *The Living End*.

(2) Plot can also be abstracted from character and mark an ontological position. Plot construction then offers *endless possibilities* of branching out, turning, reversing the direction, and combining freedom, necessity, and chance — a dissolution of the dualities that used to provide order. Borges (like other postmodern fictionists) was fascinated with such plots. In his stories, spatial simultaneity and temporal regressus ad infinitum both contrast and connect in the concept of *Chinese boxes*: in every box there is another box there is another box, etc.; or, in each labyrinth there is another labyrinth there is another labyrinth, and so on. The linearity and end-directedness of Borges's labyrinthine plots, for instance the quest, is always translated into open-endedness by means of multiplying and superimposing motives, clues, and directions in such a way that they become contradictory, diffused, ultimately unrecognizable, or at least attain an equal status of (non)probability for the reader, who finally finds him or herself in a decentered maze without end. Consolation, however, always lies in the infinity of possibilities on the way; actually the way *is* the end. In Barth's words, Borges "need *not* rehearse its [the labyrinth's] possibilities to exhaustion"; what he needs is the awareness of the infiniteness of its possibilities to succeed in his "heroic enterprise, with salvation as its object" (1984, 75). That is also what Barth says of himself when he notes that "the process is the content" (Bellamy 1974, 10), and many postmodern authors would join him. Plot is here practically deprived of beginning and end, or at least of the end; it is the *middle* that counts.

(3) Barth takes up Borges's method of multiplying plot but gives it a new accent by *parodying* plot patterns and their rationality, a strategy that leads to a *surplus* of plot, thereby further loosening the pattern of cause and effect. By using patterns the individual situation is foregrounded. Barth writes: "But the possibility of constructing a fantastically baroque plot appealed to me most, the idea of turning

vigorously against the modernist notion that plot is an anachronistic element in contemporary fiction” (Bellamy 1974, 11). In his *Sot-Weed Factor* “the fantastically baroque plot” serves the principle of circumstantial, seemingly arbitrary patterning. In the title story of *Lost in the Funhouse*, the narrator explains: “the plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires” (92). It is fantasized in order to keep, in Roland Barthes’s words, “the plural of a text” intact: “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, an ultimate structure” (1974, 11-12).

(4) In his search for viable stories and patterns, a writer like Barth *liberates possibilities* that lie buried in the plotted stories of other authors, especially in *The Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*. In “Dunyazadiad”, one of the three stories in Barth’s *Chimera*, Dunyazade, the sister of Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights*, in bed with her lover, the prince, holds his erect penis and threatens to cut it off with a razor while she tells the story of Scheherazade. Thus she repeats, reverses, and parodies the central storytelling situation and plot of the source book, where Scheherazade is threatened by the king and saves her life by, in addition to making love, telling stories, but stopping short every morning at daybreak without finishing her story so that the king has to let her live for another day in order to hear the end of the story. Barth extends the original text to form a sequel and extracts the comic perspective by elaborating on the source book (see also *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*). Coover employs a similar strategy in his novel *Pinocchio in Venice* that, as the dust jacket text phrases it:

is at once a dazzling postmodern tour de force and a delightful, lovingly wicked companion volume to the original Pinocchio story [...], C. Collodi’s *Adventures of Pinocchio*. Coover’s hero is now a very old man, a scholar and aesthete who has learned all his civilizing lessons well and has now returned to Italy — his homeland — and to Venice, the city that shaped him — his ‘roots’, if you will — there to complete his final great tribute to the Blue-Haired Fairy, his magnum opus, called simply *Mamma*. [...] The result is a brilliant philosophical discourse on what it means to be human; a hilarious and bawdy slapstick adventure, in the best commedia dell’ arte tradition, that brings to life all Pinocchio’s old friends and enemies.

(5) Formulaic fiction patterns, such as the fairy tale, the Western, the detective novel and science fiction, are incorporated into American postmodern fiction in the works of Barthelme, Brautigan, Reed, Pynchon not only for the purpose of “connecting” with popular fiction (see Fiedler) but also of preserving the vital energy of the aesthetic text against the danger of its being stereotyped as coherent symbolic structure. What Elkin finds “in popular culture” is “immense energy” (LeClair and McCaffery 118). These formulaic forms fit into the general postmodern program of depthlessness, which is a strategy against aesthetic closure, but they do not fit the technique of multiplying positions. This is mended by parodying the pattern (Brautigan, *The Hawkline Monster*) or by reversing it. The scheme of the detective model “normally” begins with uncertainty and ends in certainty; in the postmodern novel this design is inverted. It begins with certainty and ends in uncertainty (Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*).

(6) Plot and character are contrasted. Plot as time sequence may be conceptualized into *ritualistic trials*, a rite of passage, according to the model lives of mythic heroes, and at the same time may be ironized when the protagonist follows the mythic hero’s stages of initiation and development without being one himself, as Giles does in Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* or Bellerophon in the “Bellerophoniad” (*Chimera*). Plot and character here both play with and against one another, establishing an ironic view of patterning as well as of character, while at the same time confirming the victory of pattern over character (and individuality). The victory of pattern and plot, however, is suspended by the negentropic manifoldness of narration, *storytelling*.

(7) The dramaturgy of plot as primordial narrative force is used, as in Barth’s *LETTERS*, to keep the systems of narration, of individuality, and of life open by circulating energy, by making plot into manifold “stories”. In *LETTERS* “[d]ramaturgie” is defined as “the incremental perturbation of an instable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium” (767). This method of multiplication demands a combination of *pattern-construction* and *pattern-dissolution* so that form and force or chaos are both interrelated and relativized. Continuous repetition, correlation, reversal, and ambiguity strive for closure and non-closure at the same time. The blank of the open end subverts the



entropy of death and gives non-closure victory by concentrating on the partial, not the total, on the narrated situation and its incongruencies. The multiplicity of possible stories always relativizes the actual one and initiates other versions. Thus Sukenick can claim: "God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version" (*DN* 41). The multiplicity of versions characterizes also Coover's "The Babysitter" and Federman's *Take It or Leave it*. The multiplication of the ending defines Brautigan's *A Confederate General from Big Sur*.

(8) Plot becomes a psychological problem, a narrative theme, and an operative strategy. It is conceived as something "plotted", as the *conspiracy* of an outside power, of a mysterious "They". Lady V. in Pynchon's novel *V.*, for instance, is connected with the "Plot Which Has No Name". This plottedness is not represented as such by the authority of a narrator and is thus made a thematic device as in Barth's case, but it appears primarily as the result of the imagination of a character, so that its actuality status as something "plotted" remains dubious, and the character appears as possibly or even probably paranoid. The thematized plot and the paranoid character are thus substantiated and emptied at the same time, substantiated as narrative devices (Pynchon speaks of "operational paranoia") that allow for concrete entanglements and conflicts, and emptied, since plot and character may consist only of fictions within fictions. "World" and character therefore become discontinuous. Pynchon's novels *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* are the best but not the only examples.

(9) History may provide the plot. But then the logical pattern of history that would be the basis of the plot is deconstructed (Barth, Reed, Pynchon, Coover), by (a) placing the (universal) pattern outside (the chronological sequence of) time, by (b) multiplying the patterns of cause and effect, by (c) abolishing teleology (all three in Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*), and by (d) using "[d]esign as game. Randomness as design" (Coover, *PB* 190), and thus trying to "sabotage history. They won't know whether we are serious or whether we are writing fiction"(Reed; qtd. in Martin, "Clio" 21).

(10) Federman, like Sukenick, emphasizes the self-establishment of plot and accentuates the self-building sequence of

situations. In *Take It or Leave It*, quoting Aristotle on catharsis, he reflects: “Interesting! However, since we are not interested here (what are we a constipated race?) in plot but only travel, it is useless to worry about such problems”. What is meant with “travel” is explained, too: “Once the story is launched it must go on it must follow its course however crooked it may be, even if it takes the wrong direction” (*ToL* n.p.). Force here gains supremacy over form. The model case for this version of sequentiality is Beckett’s “Imagination Dead Imagine”. The mastery of plot is here denied; the actions of the narrator are reduced to repetitive movements into and out of a vague space, a white rotunda that does not allow any measurements. The events described are uncontrollable. They are the rise and fall of heat and cold, white and black within the rotunda, marked by pauses, more or less long, that separate the cycle of rise and fall. Separation is complemented with fusion; “the rise now [being] fall, the fall rise, these in their turn to be completed, or to stop short and mark a pause, more or less long” (“IDI” 10). The pause is the only remnant of stability, the mediator between, and divider of, the extremes in the rotunda, “heat and cold, black and white”, that will rise and fall, “whereby [I]ight and heat remain linked as though supplied by the same source of which still no trace” (11). The text is filled and emptied by the simultaneous double movement of deconstruction and reconstruction, which remain without origin and aim. It is a pure example of situationalism, of situations marked by process and pause, with scarcely any links between the situations except for the formal, temporal but meaningless cycle of rise, fall, and pause that constitutes the imagination’s rhythm of the ineffable.

(11) The “plot of thought”,<sup>88</sup> originating in the character, is dissolved in favor of a juxtaposition of beliefs and attitudes, as for instance, in Gass, Coover or Elkin. Innocence versus experience is a central paradigm in Gass’s *Omensetter’s Luck* or Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*.

### 6.2.3.2. Simultaneity and Succession

Sequentiality and plot build the organizational matrix of succession. In postmodern fiction plot avoids the rationality of stringent form by loosening up its logical design and intermixing it

with the situationalism of mere succession, or with the other counter-plan of composition: simultaneity and plurality and their “spatial” intercrossings. “Spatial” organization, of course, is always part of the structuring plot because of the (inter)relations that develop out of the sequentiality of time; but for heuristic purposes, the “spatial” factors may here be isolated as strategies of their own. In fact, types of authors can be differentiated according to their penchant for the one or the other, sequentiality or simultaneity. Since the narrative energy produces the temporal process as basic line in fiction, and the time-flow creates linearity, Barth, as already mentioned, pleads for taking the “linearity” (together with the “visual verbality”) of fiction most seriously, indeed, “instead of trying to defeat time, for example, successive time, in narrative, as some writers have attempted in the twentieth century, perhaps we should *accept* the fact that writing and reading are essentially linear activities and devote our attention as writers to those aspects of experience that can best be rendered linearly [...] instead of trying to force the medium into things that are not congenial to it” (Bellamy 1974, 4). He therefore asserts, “I like plot in fiction in the same way that I like melodic music” (Bellamy 1972a, 136).

Hawkes, however, emphasizes simultaneity, characterized by the interstice of repetition, variation, and intercrossing. In an early interview, he notes his preference for strategies that work with simultaneity instead of sequentiality: “My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly elaborately structured [...] Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of my work” (123). Federman interprets simultaneity as the break-up of regular sequence, and he translates it into the reading process. In *Double or Nothing*, he advises the reader on page 127 to read the page from the bottom up to the top, from left to right, while the next page is supposed to be read again from the bottom to the top but now from right to left. Gass divides contemporary fiction into two kinds: “those who are still writing performatively and those who are not. [...] The new mode is not performative and not auditory. It’s destined for the printed page, [...] you are supposed to crisscross the page with your eye, getting references and gists; you are supposed to see it flowing on the page, and not sound it in the head. [...] *Gravity’s Rainbow* was written for print” (LeClair and McCaffery 158).

Though in addition to the organization of sequentiality, every text builds up structures of simultaneity and plurality, what counts is the emphasis on the one or the other, the temporal or the “spatial” form, that counts. In fact, taking the cue from Barth’s remark about those who are “trying to defeat time”, one could, in addition to Thomas Wolfe’s distinction between “putter-inners” and “leaver-outers”, distinguish between “time-followers” (Barth, Pynchon) and “time-breakers” (Robbe-Grillet, Barthelme) in postmodern fiction, which are positions on a scale with many transitions and combinations. The extreme model of the time-breaking novel would be the fictive Tralfamadorian “novel” in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It emphasizes simultaneity instead of linearity and continuity: “each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message — describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvellous moments seen at one time” (76). Of course, this anti-ideal to the linearity that Barth proposes as the “natural” structure of narrative, its linearity, cannot be achieved, and nobody would like it anyway because the force of life is drained out of it. Even the narrator’s meta-reflection on the failing of his plot in Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” cannot make linearity disappear, though theoretical reflection and practical manipulation can disrupt and reduce, or inflate and fantasize it.

Yet the ideal course is the interaction of simultaneity and succession. It can be perfected first by making the process of fiction a decentered labyrinth, and, second, by pluralizing time itself not as “real” time but as possible time. These are Borges’s strategies, which in many ways have become models for postmodern fiction (together with the reflexivity of Beckett’s fiction). The way a labyrinth signifies is through both “spatial” simultaneity and temporal succession. Borges devises the labyrinth as the spatial/temporal model of the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical situation of humankind. All possibilities being simultaneous and part of an endless succession, a labyrinth is the place, “in which all men would become lost” temporally and spatially (*Lab* 22), in which

labyrinthine simultaneity in space turns into infinity in time, and vice versa. The possibilities of endless reversals make simultaneity (of progress and regress) a dynamic process. The labyrinth is everywhere, “an irrational universe”, “symboliz[ing] man’s insecurity” (Murillo 266), a “lack of order or apparent purpose” (Lewald 630); and narrative reflects this state of affairs. If one escapes from one labyrinth, it is only to run into “other, more inextricable and heterogeneous labyrinths” (*Lab* 73):

I imagined it [the labyrinth] inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms ... I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars (*Lab* 23).

For Borges, time, like space, is always fragmentary, incomplete, without origin and goal. All attempts to order space and time are futile, and can only establish order as presence in absence. Borges — in his own words — “has always been obsessed by time” (DiGiovanni 57), not by “time given by the watch”, but “real” time, which is possible time. The meaning of possible time is demonstrated by Ts’ui Pên’s conception of time in “The Garden of Forking Paths”. It combines simultaneity and succession:

In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time (28).

Yet there is not only an infinite series of simultaneous times, but all times are simultaneous in the present moment, too. In “The Garden of Forking Paths” Yu Tsun says:

Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely *now*. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening to me (20).

The main point for Borges and other postmodern fictionists is that the “net of divergent, convergent and parallel times” mixes sequence, reversal of sequence, and simultaneity, expansion and concentration

of times, in such a way that time eludes categorization and becomes itself mysterious. Pynchon builds his first three novels on this multi-faceted time pattern. In addition to Borges's labyrinth, Beckett's self-reflexivity enters the program of postmodern fiction and turns meta-reflective. While the labyrinth achieves simultaneity in narrative sequence (we will come back to this point later), meta-fictional reflection aims at and attains simultaneity by juxtaposing different discourses and by interrupting and slowing down the flow of time. The reader simultaneously receives the story and the reflexive break-up of the story.<sup>89</sup> It is important that, in contrast to the modernist novel, the strategies of simultaneity in postmodern fiction do *not* replace the loss of temporal and logical/causal order with the spatial order of cross references, symmetries, meaningful (symbolic) parallelisms and oppositions, or rather, as we have seen, they do it in a different way, indicating chaos within order.

The second method of negating a meaningful space-time continuum chooses *mechanical time* as its absolute principle for the organization of the text, or, more precisely, it selects mere *succession* as both pattern and denial of pattern. Mechanical succession, like mechanical simultaneity (sameness), works towards disorder, the loss of difference, and finally towards entropy and death. When a fictional character sees his or her life as a mere succession of (irrelevant) moments, he or she recognizes only a senseless repetition that lacks the spice of life, surprise, and is, out of inner necessity, confronted with death, as is the Reverend Furber in Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* or Papa in Hawkes's *Travesty*. As in the previous discussion of presentism, we encounter in mere succession, too, the loss of past and present and of time's humanizing structures. Yet the emphasis on mere succession can also result in liberation. Aiming at the subversion of meaningful linearity, origin, causality, and teleology, but searching for its own form, postmodern fiction experiments with the possibility of translating the idea of pure successiveness into significant serial narrative structure. Such an undertaking is difficult since it has to eliminate or transcend spatial form, the net of interrelations that establishes a pattern of contacts and bonds, as well as the stability of space itself, which is the most elemental constituent of any kind of world-creating narrative process. Space has almost automatically an illusion-building, stabilizing, and meaning-giving quality, and it can seldom and definitely not for a

longer period of time be temporalized enough without the text's becoming inert, uncommunicative, entropic.

Emphasis on mere succession (of words, images, situations, ideas) and contingency used to be compensated by a specific operational code that gave the text directions and sense. In modernist texts the dissolution of temporal/logical/causal order into mere sequentiality is offset by the psychological frame of reference and the cross-references of the (symbolic) spatial order. This double frame makes for a meaningful interaction of succession and simultaneity, as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the order of narrative is almost pure temporal succession of what happens minute for minute at a certain place and in the minds of the characters. This pure succession, neglecting causal/logical and temporal transitions between levels of experience, between perception, emotion, and reflection, creates discrepancies that impede the "good" continuation of time, but it also fashions a "spatial" and psychological structure that forces into existence the continuity of the discontinuous and the congruity of the incongruous. The co-presence of the following utterances appears at first glance purely contingent:

His smile faded as he walked, a heavy cloud hiding the sun slowly, shadowing Trinity's surly front. Transpassed one another, ingoing, outgoing, clanging. Useless words. Things go on the same day after day: Squads of police marching out, back: trams in, out. Those two loonies mooching about! Dignam carted off (344).

Yet contingency is here cancelled by the inner order of the stream of consciousness, resting in the psychology of character. This method of what we will call *diagrammatic* narration is also cultivated by Barthelme and his followers, but postmodern fiction abandons or at least strictly relativizes the psychological framework that is important for Joyce and modernist literature in general. Postmodern writers generally abandon or at least restrict interiority to the point that it loses its identity-and-structure-building wholeness; they rather choose a non-integratable pattern of incongruity, for instance "mere" succession, which often takes in language the form of the list, binding together incongruent items in the mere succession of words. As mentioned, Gass and Bartheleme are fond of such listings. In the following passage from Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, even the borderlines of the page appear suspended in favor of the listing of

ever-new transformations. The latter press on in infinite succession and seriality, abandoning in the process the finiteness of space and limiting the possibility of creating a recognizable world with defined relations among the items that fill the situation:

This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yipes and the slamming steel shutters of commerce, screams of pain and pathos and screams plain pathetic, copulating cats and outraged squawk of the displaced bull head, prophetic mutterings of brujo in nutmeg trances, snapping necks and screaming mandrakes, sigh of orgasm, heroin silent as dawn in the thirsty cells, Radio Cairo screaming like a berserk tobacco auction, and flutes of Ramadan fanning the sick junky like a gentle lush worker in the grey subway dawn feeling with delicate fingers for the green folding crackle (NL 95).

Pure succession here tends to a spatial pattern of simultaneity, but this spatial order dissolves under the impact of the incongruous details that do not form a picture and resist a signifying interpretation. In this way, the syntagmatic, i.e., sequential aspect, the immanent syntactical structure of language as opposed to its referential and pattern-creating, “spatial” function, gain the upper hand over meaning-building designs. In the extreme case that rejects the psychological frame, language is finally only received as a stream of words. Behind all this is of course the reality-language problem and the problem of storytelling in a period of a professed or imputed exhaustion of traditional and modernist narrative strategies. As mentioned, Barth wrote: “This is the final test. Try to fill the blank. Only hope is to fill the blank. Efface what can’t be faced [i.e., the void] or else fill the blank” (LF 102). This filling of the blank finally becomes a stuttering of fragments in an incoherent stream of words, and the stuttering of fragments turns out to be the “emblem” (Barth) of the artifice. In Barth’s “Title” we read:

And that my dear is what writers have got to find ways to write about in this adjective adjective hour of the ditto ditto same noun as above, or their, that is to say our, accursed self-consciousness will lead them, that is to say us, to here it comes, say it straight out, I’m going to, say it in plain English for once, that’s what I’m leading up to, me and my bloody anticlimactic noun, we’re pushing each other to fill the blank in (109).



#### 6.2.4. Linear Time as Medium of Suspense

The linear time-frame of fiction creates *suspense*. Suspense dramatizes time by focusing attention not on the past or the present but on the future; and it initiates participation and care. It motivates the reader's involvement in the horizontal action/plot and the caring identification with the characters, their problems, and their destiny. Though suspense is a natural given, it has to be built up in narrative. Suspense, being oriented towards the future and lacking knowledge at the present, emerges in fiction out of the undeterminability of action/event and the unforeseeability of connections; it stimulates curiosity and an interest in the "other". Suspense as the apprehension of the unexpected and unfamiliar is always based on and balanced by the expectation of the familiar and its repetition. Conversely, the expectation of the familiar is always tempered by the uncertainty of the future, the fear of surprise and of the other. We expect change because of our experience that life (as well as narrative) is not predictable, is accidental and contingent, and is full of unexpected turns of events. As many theorists of narrative have noted, three temporal periods are necessary to make up a story: a condition of equilibrium, the disturbance of the equilibrium, and the restoration of order. This progression can go from an unsatisfactory to a satisfactory state or from a good world to a bad one. The process varies in the sequence of the different stages and the detailing of the stages within the pattern. That which is "narratable", D.A. Miller notes, is a "disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency"; the non-narratable is "the state of quiescence assumed by a novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end" (ix). In narrative, suspense is created by the fact that alternative possibilities exist at every point in the plot. The character who acts might not have acted, who fails might have succeeded, who accepts failure might have reacted against it (see, for instance, Bremond and Cancalon). Suspense is organized in the text by the forward-moving, goal-oriented but direction-changing and continuously reoriented *plot*. The energies of plot and suspense re-enforce each other in engaging the reader's attention and leading him or her along in reading. But there is a difference between suspense and plot. Suspense aims at full emotional involvement of the reader at the cost of aesthetic distance. Plot, even the "plot of action", and more so the

“plot of character”, or the “plot of thought” (Crane 620), aims at making sense.

Though suspense is oriented towards the future, it also redefines the present and the past; it is the first step towards the reader’s unified experience of temporality, of past, present and future, and it opens the dimension of care, care for a character and its fate. The experience of change and suspense dramatizes the temporal succession and is the most important temporal link between the natural and social frames, space-time and character-action. The directedness towards the end, the unification of the natural and the social frames, the direct stimulation of emotion and of identification with the characters are of course all aspects of suspense that the postmodern novel would supposedly avoid since they would run counter to the ideology of dispersal, of de-unification, of dissolving character and plot. Yet there is an irresistible elementary *force* in suspense. In its rawest form it is aligned with the “body principle”, with the materiality and vulnerability of animate bodies and inanimate things. As both an outcome and a stimulation of desire, it hopes for satisfaction, and fears dissatisfaction and pain. It levels differences, hierarchies, and privileges in the intense feeling of participation, of curiosity and “interest”, of vitalizing expectation, of fear and hope. Suspense and its pleasures break through culture and its controls; they are placed outside culture in the sphere of *life*, nature, and *desire*, though they may derive from and take the form of culture. As such an elementary force, suspense is vital for fiction, actually indispensable. This is true also of postmodern fiction, in spite of Sukenick’s remark that postmodernist authors, emphasizing possibility instead of actuality in the text, allegedly are not partial to the unitary effect of suspense, which is based on illusion and identification (Sukenick 1985, 69).

Suspense is the dramatization of linear time that leads the reader through the text, connecting beginning and end. It may be transformed, ironized, even deleted (as far as that is possible), but it is always there as a time factor to be reckoned with. In stories like “The Indian Uprising”, Barthelme builds on suspense as a ground factor of narrative in order to thwart it. The same is true of Brautigan’s novel *In Watermelon Sugar*. Barth is typically ambivalent in his statements. He likes “the simple appeals of suspense, of *story*” (Gado 141), and cherishes “the aesthetic pleasure

of complexity, of complication and unravelment, suspense, and the rest" (Bellamy 1974, 7); but he also plays with them. He is especially inventive in using and deconstructing suspense. He makes suspense the basis of the story in "Night-Sea Journey", where, as mentioned above, a spermatozoon, on its way through the vagina towards the egg-cell, looks forward towards, full of fear and suspense, and loudly protests against, his impending death. In the story "Title" from *Lost in the Funhouse*, Barth speaks of suspense derisively from the meta-level of reflection; "Do you want to go on, or shall we end it right now? Suspense. I don't care for this either" (103). However, in the title story of *Lost in the Funhouse*, the metafictional reflection holds that all stylistic, psychological, and philosophical interruptions subverting the flow of time or bringing it to a halt and impeding suspense cause impatience in narrative. In other cases Barth both employs and deletes suspense by "repeating" suspense-rich stories, making them into foils for his own stories, as in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, where he exploits the legendary voyages of Sinbad the Sailor from *The Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*. Postmodern fiction often uses suspense in order to play with and work around it.

If one dispenses with the tradition that a story must come to an end, suspense becomes free-floating, in a way "abstract", because it has lost its destination, which is very much part of its being. Hawkes, for instance, "fictionalizes" suspense: the actual status of the planned suicide and the suspense raised in *Travesty* is unclear, since the suicidee who should be dead is still able to tell the story of his and his companions' imminent death. Pynchon is the postmodern author who most "seriously" and productively makes use of suspense by employing the pattern of the quest in all his novels. He sets a beginning, even gives motivations though in a diffused, not quite "satisfactory" way, fills the stages of the quest with movement, action and reflection, but disperses the goal, as in *Crying of Lot 49* where it is uncertain whether the Tristero Countercultural Communication System searched for by Oedipa is merely a fiction caused by paranoia or an "actual" organization. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, suspense is fed by a full gallery of characters and numerous plots, all of which, however, come to nothing, with the rocket, the goal of Slothrop's search, finally being suspended above the movie theater. In *V.*, where the goal of the quest, the Lady V.,

dissolves as character and expands into many selves, and the quester does not really want to reach his goal, the Lady V., in order not to abandon suspense and come to a standstill (surprise being the signum of life, according to Pynchon), though he does not even know if the motivation for the quest is mere fiction or based on something actual. In all these cases, especially in *Crying of Lot 49*, and also in Brautigan's *The Hawkline Monster*, suspense is based on the pattern of the *detective novel*. It is employed as a plot structure in order to be played with and reversed (Tani 149).<sup>90</sup> While the detective novel moves from disequilibrium to equilibrium, the detective pattern in postmodern fiction advances from equilibrium to "disequilibrium, suspense and general insufficiency" and is thus made "narratable" (Miller 19). There are four ways suspense and plot are correlated. Either the two are combined, interrelated as in Pynchon, though not quite in the traditional way since the generator of suspense cannot be defined in a satisfactory way; or plot is drained of suspense as in Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* or the invasion of meta-reflection; or suspense is never focused enough to result in a plot as in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*; or both plot and suspense are suspended as in many of Federman's and Sukenick's novels or in play with verbiage as in Barthelme's "Sentence".

### **6.2.5. Cyclical Time as Cosmic Order, as Myth, and as Repetition of the Familiar: Barth, Beckett, Gaddis, and Reed**

The cyclical model of time has come to complement the linear one, not only in postmodern fiction but also in certain versions of literary history, for instance, in the evaluation of the relationship between modern and postmodern literature. Jean-François Lyotard argues surprisingly that the postmodern "is undoubtedly a part of the modern [...] A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state and this state is constant" (1984c, 79). Postmodern in this sense is a disruption of totality in favor of a plurality that has to precede the (modernist) attempt at totality and remains a part of it. In this argument, postmodernism would not only precede modernism but also follow it, since the modernist ideology of order, being not "eternal", would call up as a reaction the postmodern dissolution of its order of wholeness (cf. Lyotard: "Let

us wage a war on totality” [1984c, 82]). This cyclical argument is related to the Russian Formalists’ idea that periods of literary growth and maturity are followed by periods of decay before, with the parody of the old, a new cycle begins. Contrary to Lyotard, Eco does not concentrate on the stage that precedes modernism but on the one that follows it, both modernism and postmodernism now being understood as general movements that repeat themselves cyclically in history. Each historical period develops a cycle of modernist art with an avantgarde that overthrows the past and writes hermetic texts, creating as reaction to mannerisms of the past a postmodern aesthetic of enjoyment that pleurably revives the relation to past styles, avoiding simple repetition by ironic turns.

This cyclical thinking is also the source of aesthetic programs, as John Barth demonstrates, who, taking his lead from Borges, sees the historical process in terms of exhaustion and replenishment, and transfers the cyclical model to his own writing. The “used-upness of certain forms” (1984, 64) is countered by their replenishment, which from a self-reflexive imitation and transformation of the used-up materials and methods. The right way for fiction could be “the deliberate imitation of a novel” (72), imitation of preformed material by general parody. As Barth has said with respect to *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* (and in reference to the eighteenth century novel and its omniscient Author with a capital A), he writes “novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author” (72). For him “it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature — such far-out notions as grammar, punctuation ... even characterization! Even *plot!*” (68) The cyclical model is also pertinent to Barth’s own texts. Since he cannot represent reality directly, can only fabricate artificial versions or rather stories of reality, he finds himself “going in circles, following my own trail” (*Ch* 18). This “going in circles” includes in *LETTERS* the recycling of his own characters (and narrative energy) from his previous texts to keep the system open in an ever-new, negentropic process of telling stories. Barth in the “Frame-Tale” in *Lost in the Funhouse* refers to the *Moebius strip* as a metaphor for this cyclical kind of fiction, asking the reader to cut out the sentence “ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN” and turn it into a Moebius strip, which is a strip turned a half twist (180

degrees) with the two ends connected, creating a one-sided surface on which one may go from inside to outside without leaving the single surface. The Moebius strip is used by Lacan as a metaphor for the impossibility of “language to refer to anything outside itself” (172). In Barth, the cyclical model also refers to intertextual relations in general, and the return to the source, the origin; indeed, “no one has claim to originality in literature; all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes” (1984, 80). As Eliade states, “[t]he *return to origins* gives the hope of a rebirth” (1968, 30), and accordingly the genie in the “Dunyazadiad” in *Chimera* tells Scheherazade and Dunyazade that he “aspired [...] by some magic [...] to go back to the original springs of narrative” (*Ch* 17), and to come back with new energies and new insights.

But the image of the circle has ambiguities. In nature it is the image of return, rebirth, rejuvenation, eternity. In culture it has also the negative note of repetition, of going in circles, of exhaustion. This may be one reason that Barth employs various metaphors for the cyclical mode. He adds to the Moebius strip the *echo*, the *labyrinth* and especially the *spiral*. The spiral (adding to the circle the up-and-down movement) becomes an important spatial/temporal configuration in *Chimera* where the victory over time by narrative and the constitution of some kind of immortality is the central theme. In “Perseid”, one of the three tales in *Chimera*, not the linear time-concept wins out, but the cyclical one, varied, however, by the spiral version. Yet the cyclical time-concept symbolized in the spiral is no longer existentialized by the “moment of being” or by a “revelation” that opens the mind to the essential and universal forces of life and culture, as in modernist texts; it is here transferred from existence into narration, though it appears under a cosmic perspective, too. The Greek hero Perseus gains his immortality not as a man but as a constellation of stars. However, to gain and retain this state of permanence, Perseus, in the shape of the star constellation named after him, has to become a narrator, who tells his tale, the time-bound story of a mythic hero. By out-tricking, as it were, the universal law of time, under the auspices of the narrative “as-if”, the artifact, the human creation, links up with the eternity of the universe in a mythic star formation named by humans. The star constellation as a substance, however, must again be dissolved into the process of

narration in order to persevere: “to *be* the tale I tell to those with eyes to see and understanding to interpret; to raise you up forever and know that our story will never be cut off, but nightly rehearsed as long as men and women read the stars” (*Ch* 142). Only the story is negentropic, can guarantee survival.

The way to surmount time is finally a combination of *myth* and *storytelling*, both of which are intimately interrelated as elemental forms of force and connect the individual with the collective past. Going back “to the very roots and springs of story” (*Ch* 36) also entails a return to the roots of myth, for “[t]he myths themselves are produced by the collective narrative imagination (or whatever), partly to point down at our daily reality” (*Ch* 333). A comparison with the modernist use of myth demonstrates the change in its deployment in postmodern fiction. Modernists like Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, or Thomas Wolfe revert to a cosmic-cyclical time-concept related to myth in order to transform time from the worn-out linear notion of progress and use into a universal power beyond human reach. It would appear that the postmodern authors could have no use for this synthesizing power of cyclical nature, which had exhausted itself as a meaningful frame of reference at the latest by the end of the Thirties. The postmodernists, however, re-activate myth, but with their own formula, which is the breaking of form and pattern. In Barth and others, myth is no longer understood in terms of the mythical method that T. S. Eliot in his review of Joyce’s *Ulysses* demanded of all modern literature, i.e., to use or to create a mythical order as foil against which the wasteland of our time shows more clearly (1923). An antique myth is not contrasted against the social and individual wasteland in a dualistic scheme of order vs. disorder, of mythical order against the alienating state of the current world, but is used as a constructionist model, with an intrinsic value only as both *aesthetic* form and force.

When linearity and history are considered emptied forms, the cosmic order, the circular course and the rhythmical phases of nature, i.e., the integration of “dynamization” and “staticization of time” (Eliade)<sup>91</sup> in mythical thought, become attractive for their potential to include persistence in succession and vice versa, to balance form and force in equilibrium. Mythical configurations, not being rationalizable in simple uni-logical terms, represent basic (narrative)

force and mirror elemental energies and desires. In order to avoid only repeating the antique myths, postmodern texts overform and aestheticize them as operational constructs by another elemental force, storytelling. Both are kindred spirits, deriving from the same source, the imagination, “the collective narrative imagination”, “the very roots and springs of story” (Eliade). In the process, storytelling gains for itself both the form and force of myth, without losing the ability to manipulate and fabricate it as material that can be layered with additional perspectives, played with, ironized, and parodied, without losing its basic effect of being force as form, form with its own system of order that keeps open the ineffable.

If the force of myth and the force of storytelling mutually empower each other, one may think of making storytelling itself a myth. Ambrose Mensch, one of the main characters in *LETTERS*, proposes to the author the project *LETTERS*, which is thus born inside the fiction by a kind of inner frame-tale, and attains the status of a myth, an “Escalation of echoing cycles into ascending spirals = *estellation*: the apotheosis of stories into stars” (Let 768). This intricate method of creating relations is an abstraction of what Barth does in the “Perseid” (*Chimera*), where myth and storytelling support each other but are still separated. The myth of Perseus attains duration in a star constellation, but Perseus, in order to keep up his status as mythic hero, has to come down every night and tell his story. Myth itself can be split into the ritual form of myth and its vital force, and while form and its rigid ritual may be ironized and parodied, the enlivening force can be affirmed and made the source of narrative energy. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, the mythic-religious hero of the title repeats the initiation ritual of a mythic hero and, following the mythic pattern, breaks up the stifling rationalistic traditions of the university, which, using the similarity of the words, is made to stand in for the universe, and advances to hero, martyr, and Grand Tutor, a kind of prophet and philosopher. In the process, however, he also shatters the mechanical prescriptions of the mythic scheme and expands to the openness of unpatterned individual experience — before becoming a radical pessimist who recognizes the power of repetition, the inevitable ossification of force by the system.

Giles comes face to face with the realization of the stifling cyclical return of the same and the abstraction of everything particular into the system of generalities, of the rationalities of reason



or myth. Barth says: “Stories like *Giles* which seem to contradict and then to contradict the contradiction — obviously those are not real contradictions, just the final workings out of the pattern” (Ziegler and Bigsby 27). Mythical pattern and cyclical time in the first half of the circle lead to regeneration, but in the second half to failure and deadening repetition — except that narrative keeps everything open. Storytelling has the last word as vitalizing instance. The force of narrative again relativizes Giles’s negative position. His final statements are enclosed in frames of tapes and aftertapes, i.e., in further narratives, which call in doubt the authenticity of any kind of final statement and escalate “the echoing cycles into ascending spirals”; yet the tension between deadening circles and revitalizing spirals is maintained. In the attempt to trick out the teleological perspective of time, fiction increasingly acts as a force using other forces, and creates fiction upon a fiction upon a fiction, ad infinitum. Though it is Barth who pronounces the conviction most clearly, it is the ultimate credo of all postmodern fictionists: the belief in the energy of renewal present in language and in storytelling, in the redistributability of stories and myths, in fragmentation and montage, creative re-montage of fragments of the story (or stories), or in the force of words and word formations on the page: “Entropy may be where it’s all headed, but it isn’t where it is; dramaturgy [of storytelling] is negentropic, as are the stories of our lives” (*Let* 768). And, since “dramaturgy” makes the stories of our lives, “the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy: the made-up [ever renewable and multipliable] story is a model of the world” (*Ch* 256).

The contrast between myth and humanized historical time is repeated in the opposition between cyclical and linearity of time. In Gaddis’s *JR*, the writer Jack Gibbs points to an important level of meaning in the novel when he says to Major, “one of the preSocratics, Major, the rule of love and the rule of strife in the cosmic cycle of Emp” (48), referring to the cosmology of Empedocles, its model of order and chaos, and the eternal return of the same under the dominance of the divine forces of love and hate. While love connects the elements — fire, air, water, and earth — in stability, hate separates and antagonizes them, producing chaos. It seems to be the phase of chaos that reigns the present in the book where the cosmic cycle of Empedocles is misunderstood as “comic cycle” (48). The line over the main entrance of the school is thought

to be “a fragment from the second generation of his [Empedocles’s] cosmogony, may be even the first” — “When limbs and parts of bodies were wandering around everywhere separately heads without necks, arms without shoulders, unattached eyes looking for foreheads” (45).<sup>92</sup> In Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, this concept of cyclicity is made to express the confrontation of (white) civilization and nature, mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, regulation and liberation, power and resistance, thought and action. The so-called Jes Grew conspiracy — a fantasized black or black-power movement subversive to the mainstream white establishment and expressing itself in dance, Ragtime, Jazz, Blues, slang — is turned into a universal force: “Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now. Jes Grew may even have caused the ball to explode. We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. You see, life will never end [...] They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper” (233). Accordingly, “Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around” (249).

Finally, the model of cyclicity can be transferred to the materiality of the book itself. While a narrative like *Finnegans Wake* has no ending but cycles back to the beginning both in terms of language and world, Federman or Sukenick’s radically deconstructed texts formalize this cyclical model of the end returning to the beginning. They begin from nowhere and end nowhere, actually have no “beginning, middle, or end”. Something rises out of nothing and returns to nothingness. The texts begin and end in emptiness, on a white page; the book fills the space in-between, as will be demonstrated below, by succession and simultaneity, by repetition or digression, and circles around the problematics of its own artistry. This is like a copy of life and experience. The reader is called upon to *complete* the reading of a text that refuses completion and interpretation and makes a point of leading from nothing to something to nothing. The nothing-something-nothing-cycle, and the absence-presence-absence, or surface-depth/void-surface figurations connect here with the force-form-force pattern. All of them are at the basis of postmodern narrative and give it its dignity.

The cyclical time-scheme instigates both renewal and repetition. In postmodern fiction, they stand in a dialectic relationship without synthesis, as the end of *Giles Goat-Boy* demonstrates. In many modern texts, i.e. in Hardy, Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, or Hemingway, the cyclical model is a viable model of renewal, or it stimulates the confrontation with enigmatic and ineffable life. Between modern and postmodern texts, however, Beckett changes narrative ideological and method. Beckett is famous for *repetition* as a compositional matrix that signifies exhaustion. In his dissertation Federman writes that Beckett's characters "begin and end their fictional journey at the same place, in the same condition, and without having learned, discovered, or acquired the least knowledge about themselves and the world in which they exist" (1965, 4). Repetition, the "abbreviation" of cyclicity, becomes a formative principle in postmodern fiction because it is, so to speak, the "exhaustion" aspect of life and literature, while cyclicity and the spiral are the "replenishment" factors of the story in narrative and in our life. The postmodern narrative principle of simultaneity places the one beside the other. The final insight is that one cannot be quite sure which will ultimately win, circle or spiral, exhaustion or replenishment, in narrative as well as in life.

#### **6.2.6. Psychic-Existential Time: Beckett, Elkin, Barth, Didion, DeLillo, Gass**

Psychic-existential time is the temporal continuum experienced in the stream of consciousness. It shifts from present to past and future and back, connecting hopes and fears with remembered or projected instants of time.<sup>93</sup> Essential for this kind of mental time are: the cancellation of chronological sequence; the experience of the simultaneity of past, present and future; and — especially important for modernism — the existentially meaningful, enraptured moment. It is the "epiphany" (James Joyce), the moment of "recognition" and "revelation" (Joseph Conrad, Henry James), the "moment of being" or "vision" (Virginia Woolf), or "some moving passionate moment of the human condition distilled to its absolute essence" (William Faulkner; qtd. in Jelliffe 202), which overcome the fleeting and meaningless stream of mechanical time through

psychic duration (see B  ja). This ecstatic feeling of timelessness is on the level of consciousness often the counterpart of the notion of cyclical cosmic time, which in its essence is also timeless, since it knows no irreversible linear progression, no beginning and no end but only rhythmical phases and the rejuvenating certainty of ever new beginnings.

It might seem obvious that this meaning- and identity-giving moment of ecstasy is rather meaningless for postmodern writers, that, in fact, aesthetics has lost its link with ecstasy altogether. Yet this is only partly true. Deconstruction and reconstruction balance and adjust. The first traces of the deconstruction of the visionary moment are already noticeable in Joyce's novels.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the aspect of the absurd, i.e., the meaninglessness of the universe, was always inherent as a possibility in the moment of evidence. In the visionary moment and its epiphanic identification with the universal, Beckett, Camus, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, and others knew of the inclusion of this experience of the absurd in that of absolute evidence (see, for instance, Merleau-Ponty 1962, 343). Deception already qualifies the promise of absolute meaning in Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In *Molloy*, Beckett activates the absurd in the experience of absolute meaning. The individual is no longer able to identify emotionally and intuitively with something meaningful outside or inside. He feels walled into a prison of consciousness and language. His contact with the world produces only the encounter with "nameless things" and "thingless names". Since the relatedness between subject and object is the precondition for a sense of the "real", the loss of this relatedness produces the sense of the fantastic. The quasi-epiphany that Beckett depicts marks the uselessness of the intention to go beyond oneself and "connect", and thus, instead of creating the moment of evidence, of absolute meaning, it announces the end of the process of separation and fusion between subject and object that lies at the base of sense-making:

And there was another noise, that of my life become the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wilderness. Yes, there were times, when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be. Then I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems for example, stakes long since dead and ready for burning, the recess of night and the imminence of dawn, and then the labour of the planet rolling eager into winter, winter would rid it of these contemptible scabs. Or of that winter I

was the precarious calm, the thaw of the snows which make no difference and all the horrors of it all over again. But that did not happen to me often, mostly I stayed in my jar which knew neither seasons nor garden. And a good thing too. But in there you have to be careful, ask yourself questions, as for example whether you still are, and if no when it stopped, and if yes how long it will still go on, anything at all to keep you from losing the thread of the dream. For my part I willingly asked myself questions, one after the other, just for the sake of looking at them. No, not willingly, wisely, so that I might believe I was still there. And yet it meant nothing to me to be still there. I called that thinking. I thought almost without stopping, I did not dare stop. Perhaps that was the cause of my innocence (*Moll* 49).

Time is here represented in a state approaching absolute inertia. Though entropy is a “fact”, it is still resisted by “thinking” and dreaming.

In postmodern fiction, the moment of revelation, of vision is still important. It marks crucial points of significance, but it can no longer be introduced without being relativized in its meaning, in fact ironized as deception, or seen as something that is so rare that it can't be reckoned with, is even lost because surface experience obscures our sense of reality and its depth. In almost all cases, the quality of the moment of being changes towards the trivial, the mechanical, the deceptive. It loses its liberating, saving power; its meaningfulness is restricted to the moment itself without meaning-giving after-effect; or, if it is not just a deception, it is paradoxical in a new way. What in modern narrative had the quality of absolute being, knowledge, communication, never to be lost, turns here into a dubious experience, whose truth is partial at best, is relativized by other experiences or additional perspectives, becomes one of multiple discourses. The reasons for the loss of the moment of absolute evidence vary. They reach from outer or social circumstances to the inner state of the self, to the universal state of reification. In Gaddis's novel about art, *The Recognitions* (a book that shows modernist traces of existential dismay and bewilderment), this moment of recognition is still “valid”, but it is already isolated as the test of aesthetic apprehension, a field of experience that is now alone in being able to stimulate the feeling of revelation because it no longer resides in nature. But this moment of aesthetic recognition is obstructed by the outer circumstances of social routine and corruption so that one “can't see freely very often, [...] maybe seven times in a life” (*Rec* 102). Wyatt, whose artistic ambition is turned

from creating original art into the art of counterfeiting old art because original art appears no longer possible for him, experiences the moment of revelation in looking at a Picasso painting after he himself has finished, in a spirit of humble devotion, a perfect copy of an old Flemish painting:

Yes but, when I saw it [the Picasso painting], it was one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality. I'd been ... I've been worn out in this piece of work, and when I finished it I was free, free all of a sudden out in the world. In the street everything was unfamiliar, everything and everyone I saw was unreal [...] When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it [...] you can't see freely very often, hardly ever, maybe seven times in a life (102).

In Elkin's books, the moment of vision is crucial because it is a means of condensing in an instant of time the paradoxical contradictions of belief and truth. In *The Dick Gibson Show*, Dick experiences an ecstatic moment of revelation that draws together contradictory impulses into a false unity and therefore is deceptive. It transforms him, the radio voice of the ordinary, into the extraordinary mythic embodiment and programmer of the ordinary, and thus lifts him into something more than the ordinary, a hero state. This, however, is an illusion to be corrected by his experience with his audience, by the influx of their private concerns, pains, and obsessions. The protagonist watching the play of lightning and thunder through the window of his brother's solarium has the ironized feeling that

[i]t was as if he were flying in it. He thought of radio, of his physics-insulated voice driving across the fierce fall of rain; it seemed astonishing that it ever got through. Now, though he was silent, it was as if his previous immunities still operated, as if his electronically driven force pulled him along behind it, a kite's tail of flesh. He stood in the sky. He raised his arm and made a magic pass. "This is Dick Gibson", he whispered, facing the thunder, "of all the networks, coast to coast" (248-49).

Finally, in Elkin's *The Franchiser*, the paradoxical contrariness of the ecstatic moment is radicalized into a fusion of objective falsity and subjective truth. The protagonist is another believer in, and promoter of, the ordinary, the standard American

lifestyle. At a crucial point of his career as franchiser of Travel Inns, when things no longer develop as planned, he looks at the map of the United States that designates the locations of the other Travel Inns, and, in spite of the contrary facts, has his personal vision of unlimited expansion. He thinks of “loops of relationships” and feels himself to be at the center, wherever he is:

He is equidistant from the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Centralia, Illinois. He could as easily be in Columbus, Ohio, as in Petersburg, Virginia. New Orleans rings him, Covington, Kentucky, does. He is surrounded by place, by tiers of geography like bands of amphitheater. He is the center. If he were to leave now, striking out in any direction, northwest to Nashville, south to Panama City, Florida, it would make no difference. He could stand before maps like this one in the other Travel Inns. Anywhere he went would be the center (332-333).

But his vision is a symptom of his disease, multiple sclerosis: “It was the start of his ecstasy attack” (333). In his final revelation, however, he achieves a synthesis between role and self. He feels himself to be everywhere, which is now, at the end of his life, both a self-deception and a consoling personal reality. He has lived his vision; whatever its “objective” validity, it is his subjective truth.

Ben Flesh himself like a note on sheet music, the clefs of his neon logos in the American sky. All the businesses he'd had. The road companies of Colonel Sanders, Baskin-Robbins, Howard Johnson's, Travel Inn, *all* his franchises. Why, he belonged everywhere, anywhere! In California like the sound of juice, Florida like the color of sunlight, Washington and Montana like the brisk smell of thin height, and Missouri like the neutral decent feel of the law of averages (342).

John Barth again employs the moment of vision for the highest fusion of truth and falsity, the sharpest concentration on the ambivalence of knowledge, the ironization of absolute evidence. We have already discussed the moment of final ecstatic abandon that characterizes the spermatozoon's entering of the egg-cell after its “night-sea journey”, a fusion which is both the confirmation and relativization of existential synthesis. In *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, a tantalizing cosmic view called “cosmopsis”, a life-threatening malady, a paralysis of the will, befalls the protagonists. It is the ironic inversion of the romantic and modern epiphany, the moment of recognition, recognition here of the infinity

and equality of possibilities, that makes the choice of the actual inauthentic, indeed impossible. In *Giles Goat-Boy*, the existential moment of revelation is the moment of lovemaking that takes place in, and is thus framed by, the giant computer. After trials and tribulations the hero holds Anastasia in his arms. The first embrace is a ridiculed failure. Trying to solve one of his mysterious tasks as a mythical hero, i.e., “to see through her ladyship”, Giles looks through her with the help of X-rays and sees her as a mechanized organic object. This is the result:

“Anastasia ..”. The name seemed strange to me now, and her hair’s rich smell. What was it I held, and called *Anastasia*? A slender bagful of meaty pipes and pouches, grown upon with hairs, soaked through with juices, strung up on jointed sticks, the whole thing pulsing, squirting, bubbling, flexing, combusting, and respiring in my arms; doomed soon enough to decompose into its elements, yet afflicted in the brief meanwhile with mad imaginings, so that, not content to jelly through the night and meld, ingest, divide, it troubled its sleep with dreams of *passèdness*, of *love*.

She squeezed more tightly; I felt the blood-muscle pumping behind her teat, through no governance of *Anastasia*. My penis rose, unbidd by *George*; was it a George of its own? A quarter-billion beasties were set to swarm therefrom and thrash like salmon up the mucous of her womb; were they little Georges all?

I groaned. “I don’t understand anything!” (616)

His understanding of his assignment is here ironized as mechanical. The consummating moment occurs only later, again, in the “womb” of the computer, in a comic enclosure of the existential, orgiastic act. The mechanical shell, the computer, parodies both the act of lovemaking and the psychoanalytical obsession with the human wish to return to the womb, to security; and, as almost always in this novel, it ironizes the literary cliché, in this case the motif of seeing in blindness:

“Wonderful!” I cried. For though the place was lightless, and my head pursed, in *Anastasia* I discovered the University whole and clear. (672)

Parody here exposes the “clichéness” of the (modern) moment of being. But there is no ersatz for its “shock of recognition”, here the rapturous unity of experience, the fusion of the ecstasy of love and the sense of being an integral part of the universe “whole and clear”. It is in fact this crucial meaning-giving moment of love from which Giles derives his new philosophy of spontaneity, vivacity, and love



that changes his whole life and that of the campus as well, though not for good.

Gass's *The Tunnel* not only provides a further example of the separation of discourse and phenomenon in the presentation of the moment of being, it also gives an explanation as to why the moment of evidence no longer works and why the modern concept of epiphany is an illusion. When the protagonist, Kohler, refers to the "most melting moments" (562), he speaks of sexual intercourse; his following reflection about its significance explains not only why the sexual climax, but in fact the moment of being in general, in all its forms, bodily and spiritual, loses its meaning:

So ecstasy has made a laughingstock of me once or twice. But that is not why it cannot be forgiven. Nothing that intense, nothing that genuinely profound, whatever it looks like on the surface, should be certifiably counterfeit [...] the emotion [is not] unreal. Oh, no. It happened. I was, as I am sure you were (when you were), transported. What was illusory was the feeling that it — the trip — would do the soul some service (560-61).

This is the final word on the moment of being. As in most other cases that touch on modern convictions, it disillusiones the modern belief in wholeness, in totalizing meaning. The modernist idea of epiphanic experience no longer works because it does not open up a perspective for the soul in the time after, the life of the quotidian. Once more a crucial paradox in postmodern literature evolves: namely that, though postmodern fiction fantasizes world and character, it tests the self and its craving for meaning — in contrast to much of modernism — directly against the world of the quotidian and its relativization of truth.

The problems that the moment of revelation creates in postmodern fiction originate not only from the transitoriness of the experience, its lack of consequence. The other problem lies in the medium that leads to ecstatic identification with (universal) force, the vehicle of the experience of absoluteness, a person, a landscape, or a thing. They are now mere surface phenomena, have no "depth" potential, or rather, the text lacks the depth dimension, so that the allocation of depth to the experience of a situation, the fusion of self and world, the wonder of things, become more strained and less effectual or meaningful in the narrative context. This is already recognizable in the authors of late modernism, for instance, Saul

Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O'Connor, Iris Murdoch, or Doris Lessing, but also in such authors between modernism and postmodernism like Paul Auster, Joan Didion, or Don DeLillo, all of whom still use the “moment of being” as a counterbalance to the mere surfaceness of quotidian life. If the moment of being is to make sense for these writers and their colleagues under the postmodern condition, it has to contain both the claim to meaning and its relativization or denial, i.e., it has to be “dramatized” and ironized, which in the new fiction is more or less the same thing, or it has to be placed on the quotidian world of things as with DeLillo.

This first case is exemplified by Joan Didion’s novel *Democracy*. She begins the book self-ironically on the metafictional plane with reflections about how to begin her novel about her enigmatic protagonist, Inez Victor. She proposes and then rejects as a possible beginning the revival of the by now exhausted identification with (exotic) nature — used by the symbolist nature novel between 1890 and 1920 (e.g., Hardy, Conrad, Lawrence) — as an alternative to identifying with exhausted civilization. Inez is dissatisfied with her role as the wife of an ambitious politician and with the superficial public life that those engaged in politics are forced to lead, and looks instead for a significant personal life. Didion, the author, writes:

I have no unequivocal way of beginning it [the novel] though I have certain things in mind. [...]

Consider that.

I have : “Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air”:

Inez Victor’s fullest explanation of why she stayed on in Kuala Lumpur is the following:

Consider that too. I have those pink dawns of which Jack Lovett spoke. I have the dream, recurrent, in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow, in which I open a door unto a growth of tropical green (I believe this to be a banana grove, the big glossy fronds heavy with rain, but since no bananas are seen on the palms symbolists may relax) and watch the spectrum separate into pure color. Consider any of these things long enough and you will see that they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative, which makes them less than ideal images with which to begin a novel, but we go with what we have (17).

Don DeLillo goes the opposite way: he invests the quotidian with revelatory power. Criticizing the surfaceness of contemporary

life, he notes that, as a counter-reaction, his “work has always been informed by mystery” (DeCurtis 55). Mystery and the epiphanic moment grow out of dealing with commonplace things in the very place where such things would be found: the supermarket. The infinite plenitude of goods is the new medium of the ineffable for a moment of fulfillment. The protagonist of *White Noise*, a college professor, finds “in the commonplace [...] unexpected themes and intensities” (184). He relishes shopping in the supermarket:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls — it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening” (20).

Though this experience of things is more attenuated in its linguistic representation than the modernist epiphanic moment would be and has even an ironic touch to it because the “sense of replenishment” is soon to be disturbed in the book by existential problems within the family and the college, DeLillo himself in a comment on the book emphasizes the glamour of things: “In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. [...] The extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions” (DeCurtis 63). This “extraordinary wonder of things” provides an “existential credit”; and the “radiance of things” in the moments of “replenishment” serves to fill the void, to keep under the surface the “extraordinary dread”, the “death fear”, the fear of the void that waits under the surface in all postmodern narratives.

It is unavoidable that the moment of being is finally transferred to the experience of language, if language is all there is. The ecstatic experience of language results from the linguistic imaginary. It is playfully but also seriously described in terms of sexual love, which is obviously the only field of comparison left

outside language for the feeling of absolute intensity. Gass writes in *On Being Blue*:

such are the sentences we should like to love — the ones that love us and themselves as well — incestuous sentences — sentences which make an imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have a kind of orality transmogrified: not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue [...] ah! after exclamations, groans, with order gone, disorder on the way, we subside through sentences like these, the risk of senselessness like this, to float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come (57-58).

Though the moment of being thus has been limited in its validity, in fact has lost much of its revelatory power, its absolute evidence, it still serves the operational purpose of creating wonder as an antidote to fear, even if it is relativized by irony, parody or the comic mode. The latter have to have a substratum to direct their viewpoint to. This is by the way a crucial reason for postmodernism fiction's return to the traditional and modern novel and their narrative strategies.

### **6.2.7. The Ordinary and the Extraordinary, Routine and Extremity: Elkin and Barthelme**

The following discussion of the ordinary and the extraordinary concludes the analysis of time in postmodern fiction. It is a fitting conclusion since it opens the examination of time towards character, values, and modes of living. The ordinary and the extraordinary define and connect in fiction the two frames of the narrated situation, the "natural" frame of space and time and the social one of character and action/event, in their quite specific ways, which are the two fundamental alternatives the human being has for living and fulfilling his or her life. They define the life of the character(s) in general terms, in terms of preference and choice, of predisposition, chance, and destiny, which influence, even determine this choice. The ordinary and the extraordinary specify action as praxis-oriented or as status-changing event. They rest on the perspectives of time, on the linear scheme, the cyclical model and the ecstatic moment of being, and on the notions of space, i.e., closure and openness, abiding and moving, staying within boundaries and crossing them. They thus specify the limits of culture. The ordinary

creates pleasure *within* the bounds of culture and stabilizes the ego, while the extraordinary not only initiates the moment of being and revelation but also a break with the commonplace, the negation of comfort in convention, stability and continuity. However, the commonplace and its opposite are not only anthropological constants, and they not only actively define the limits, but are also defined by the way the limits are interpreted by the culture, the way the opposition of the known and the unknown, of form and force are interpreted. The ordinary asserts itself in the repetition of the known and its forms of order, in the belief that it is necessary and that there are ways to “discipline” time, to give it shape. Repetition is enjoyed because it reenacts the satisfactions of the past (see Freud 1989), because it is soothing with regard to the present and allows us to see what is coming in the future. It gives time a cyclical structure and makes possible a simple, “natural” conceptualization of time. It is moreover sedentary in space, adverse to change of place and circumstances. The return of the expected ordinary is a central form of enjoyment in all popular culture<sup>95</sup> and explains the appeal of formulaic fiction that arouses utmost suspense with the help of the unknown, but works on the expectation of the known and ends with the victory of the known and the approved, the moral principle.

The extraordinary rouses expectations, kindles the imagination, and counteracts boredom originating from endless repetition of the same. It favors linearity of time and its goal-directed structure; it is oriented not towards the present but the future, not towards satisfaction and completion but towards desire’s drives towards the new and the other; it is willing to take risks and live in suspense; its ideal is force, not form, though in heroic fiction it mostly serves ultimately a moral end. The advent of the extraordinary as something that relieves the ordinary without having a heroic, moral purpose became feasible under various circumstances and with different goals. It came to fulfill the individual’s desire for the authentic and unique or the “other”, his or her rejection of the regular, normal, the clichéd, in favor of the different. The preconditions for this degree of free choice were that the fear of nature had abated and that the individual was able to depend on society. This was the case in the eighteenth century. “In Bacon’s time”, to quote Jeremy Bentham, “in the early part of the seventeenth century — everything in nature that was, or was supposed to be,

*extraordinary*, was *alarming*; alarming, and in some shape or other, if not *productive*, *predictive* at least of human misery” (qtd. in Iser 1993, 110).

Art wavers between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Nineteenth-century English fiction might be said to favor the ordinary, while the American fiction of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville esteemed the extraordinary. Modernism, in search of the unknown, of the self and its relation to the world, of absolutes and visions of the whole, has not much interest in the quotidian. E.M. Forster writes in *A Passage to India*: “Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it [...] and a perfectly adjusted organism would be silent” (125). The extraordinary now lay in confronting the truth that society concealed. Defamiliarization and alienation were the results of awareness. Whatever the predilection and the epistemological and ethical interests, there was no confusion in modernism between the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the distinction between the two did not become thematic enough to invest much thought in the ordinary. It was always clear what should be called ordinary and what extraordinary. The ordinary became logical only for the (not really modern) satiric criticism of the clichédness of values and the corruption of society.

Things change in postmodern fiction by the simple fact that it is no longer clear what is reality and fiction. With the blurring of borderlines the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary are also obscured. Both become fantastic. The mode of representation obfuscates the borderlines between the actual and the possible and makes the possible the truly actual and the actual only a version of the possible, whether or not the author follows minimalistic or maximalistic ways of writing. Since both the ordinary and the extraordinary are fantasized, there are no cultural boundaries. This means that practically all the characters act, think, and feel in terms of breaking the limits of “normal” culture; that obsession is no longer a trait of only the extraordinary but of the ordinary, too; that paranoia is not a sign of psychosis but of the right mind; that energy does not cause chaos but the establishment of new order including disorder; that (meta)reflection is not a sign of stifling confusion but of the force of plurality and correction; that the normal “logic” of narration must be broken to attain true representation of the world; that true representation has no referent outside language

but creates a linguistic world; and that in fact force is form and rationalizing form entropy. The conditions of evaluation and attribution are radically changed, which leads to the abandonment of clear-cut opposites, dualities, and antitheses, or rather, to the ultimate exchange and fusion of the contradictory poles, which, as argued above, makes paradoxical the foundational narrative form that functions as force.

The blurring of borderlines leads to the exhaustion of the extraordinary as the absolute of the heroic and the “grand narratives” (Lyotard). This suggests the return of the ordinary in postmodern fiction but also the possibility of investing the ordinary with the extraordinary. There is a lowering of expectations, a new modesty, the sense, in Elkin’s words, that “the entire mosaic of small satisfactions [...] made up a life” (*LE* 31), that “small satisfactions” and the routine of life must be an ersatz for “memory, pity, pride”, the character’s “projects, the sense he had of justice [...] along with his sense of identity, even his broken recollections of glory”. The narrator of one of the stories in Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants* reflects, “[m]aybe it’s just that we’ve lost a taste for the simple in a world perplexingly simple” (147), which might explain the emphasis on violence in the stories of this collection. Furthermore, the suspension of the reality-fiction antithesis creates a scenario, in which, since the difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary is suspended, all positions can be freely deconstructed and reconstructed; they become, as the case may be, either equal players or significant contrastive poles with reversible roles. Just as the idea of reality or order is the necessary backdrop to the fantastic, the idea of the ordinary always serves as foil to the extraordinary, and vice versa. As mentioned, almost all the characters in post-modern fiction are double-poled: they are ordinary, and they are extraordinary. The two poles ironize each other; the tension between them is a source of narrative energy, generally of the fantasizing kind. Barthelme provides the most extreme example of demystifying the extraordinary and transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. In “The Death of Edward Lear”, the protagonist invites people to his preplanned death, which occurs exactly at the time set in the invitations. Afterwards the people present are disappointed:

People who had attended the death of Edward Lear agreed that, all in all, it had been a somewhat tedious performance. [...] Then something was understood: that Mr. Lear had been doing what he had always done and therefore, not doing anything extraordinary. Mr. Lear had transformed the extraordinary into its opposite. He had, in point of fact, created a gentle, genial misunderstanding (*GD* 103).

The dialectic of the ordinary and extraordinary, their synthesis, and the reversal of synthesis and roles, build one of the matrices that create force out of (dualistic) form in postmodern fiction by the suspension of dualism, while fiction of course needs of course dualism as a backdrop. In Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, and "Bellerophoniad" (*Chimera*), the routine and static rules of the ordinary stand against and relativize the heroic, romantic, and the mythical, and vice versa. The conditions of narrative are indeed complex. In Gaddis's *JR*, in a first step the ordinary business activities are transformed quite generally into the obsession with speculation and manipulation and attain the status of the fantastic; in a further step a child's manipulation of the business world, his building an international business concern just by activities on the telephone, crazily succeeds because he works with the "ordinary" rules of the fantastic business world and its exclusive obsession with greed and power, to the exclusion of the arts and humane values. The book thus satirically and comically ironizes the incongruencies of the "ordinary" surface-world of business, which is one-sided and therefore inhumane. In Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, the Tristero underground communication-system is posited as the extraordinary, as energy, vitality, force, against the everyday life of conformity, anonymity, and ordinary routine. But then the routine-breaking, vitalizing, extraordinary Tristero dissolves into emptiness, the two worlds in fact relativizing each other as something vs. (probably) nothing, and leaving the heroine, Oedipa, in distress, in confusion, and a state of paranoia between the ordinary and the extraordinary, losing her sense of place. DeLillo, finally, makes the quotidian the source of all possible aspects of life, of the interface of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the knowable and the ineffable. In DeLillo's *White Noise*, the ordinary, the glistening consumer world in the supermarket, by its plenitude of things and possibilities of consumption, attains the special aura of the extraordinary, "the sense of replenishment", a "fullness of being". It even creates, as men-



tioned above, something like the moment of revelation and being. With Barthelme and Elkin, the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary is the basis of a discussion of, and play with values. The antithesis of the ordinary and the extraordinary is used to discuss indirectly that which cannot be discussed directly anymore: values, also moral values and their dualities, the dissemination of values, the diffusion of the dualism of true and false, right and wrong, authentic and inauthentic.

### 6.2.7.1. Stanley Elkin: The Great Satisfactions of the Ordinary

The contrast and the interaction between the ordinary and the extraordinary are the basis of Elkin's whole work. Setting communal against individual values, and relating the quotidian life to private obsession, Elkin attends to a more psychological and sociological treatment of the problem than some of his colleagues would. In a paradoxical reversal of roles, the clichéd form of life can in Elkin's work be the source of force, and force can only express itself in stereotyped form. By basing the positive evaluation of the ordinary on the necessity of communal satisfaction, Elkin takes up the line of thinking most prominently established by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*. For Franklin human complexities were reducible to rationalizable patterns and maxims of ordinariness. What he called "a sort of key to life" (*Autobiography* 137) is, in Elkin's words, "the self-made, from the ground up vision of the world" (*DGS* 23). With Elkin, the myth of ordinary self-reliance and the vision of the communal world as harmony have been disrupted by an "aesthetic of disappointment" (*BM* 95), based on the realization that, in Elkin's words, "[t]he world is strange, the world itself" (*Bos* 262), and that the weakness of humankind leads to personal failures, the isolation of the self, bodily decay. The displayed incongruencies in Elkin are perspectivized and made multivalent by the activities of play, irony, the comic mode, together with the aesthetic of (rhetorical) excess, of what Irving Howe, characterizing the Jewish-American tradition as a whole, calls "[a] yoking of opposites [...] a rapid, nervous, breathless tempo [...] [a] hurry into articulateness [...] scrap[ing] together a language" (1977, 15).

Elkin dissolves plot as an orderly and meaningful succession of narrated units and disperses character in the traditional sense of a

unique person with an identity of self. He uses characters to contrast *conceptions* of life, beliefs, attitudes. (In *A Bad Man*, the warden Fisher says to his prisoner Feldman: "It's way of life against way of life with me, Feldman" [BM 39].) Deconstructing character and action, Elkin falls back on the natural frame of the narrative situation, space and time, and, in fact sets time against space to situate and make meaningful central motifs of his argument. He thus marks a general trend, namely that, if the cohesion of character, feeling, thought and action is abandoned, together with the wholeness and identity of the self, the dominance-relationship between the social and the natural frames of the situation is given up in favor of a conceptual interplay of all four elements. In *The Dick Gibson Show*, Dick Gibson, a radio announcer and talkmaster, is what one used to call the central character; yet it is not he, rather, it is the radio that connects all the elements, space, time, character, and action/event. It fills the air, fills time with ordinariness; it covers space and reaches a plenitude of people, while, however, all relations remain anonymous. In *The Franchiser* it is the American landscape that is filled with identical, ordinary manifestations of the American way of life, its penchant for sameness and communal spirit, signified, for example, by strings of hotels and Fast Food chains. The case in favor of the ordinary and against the extraordinary is most clearly but also playfully, wittily, and ambivalently made by a hitchhiker, a man released from prison, whom Ben Flesh, the protagonist of *The Franchiser*, picks up:

I been shut up with fellows like you decades. Crook, all crimes are crimes of passion. Adventure lies in the bloodstream like platelets [...] Get a normality. Live on the plains. Take a warm milk at bed time. Be bored and find happiness. Grays and muds are the decorator colors of the good life. Don't you know anything? Speed kills and there's cholesterol in excitement. Cool it, cool it. The ordinary is all we can handle (*Fran* 220).

Contrasted to the ordinary, the common sense, the faked, or illusionary communal spirit are the needs, the weaknesses, the passions, and the obsessions of the self. In spite of the high regard for the true communal spirit displayed in his books, Elkin has said: "There is only one psychological assertion that I would insist upon. That is: the SELF takes precedence" (LeClair 1976, 83-84). The author accomplishes this precedence in two ways. In the first case he

identifies ordinariness with “the system”, and extraordinariness with the individual, the protagonist. In an early text like *A Bad Man*, the prisoner Feldman, the “bad man”, a man with “no feel for patterns” (180) and “without a taste for the available” (201), whose motto is, “[s]omething was always at stake” (105), stands for the belief in the extraordinariness of the self, for openness and possibility, for contentiousness, resistance and struggle in a senseless universe that is “running down” towards “entropy” (235- 36). Accordingly, he also stands against the warden’s belief in the average, the regular, the predictable, the rational, and communal order, in short, as the warden calls it, “the system. Virtue is system, honor is order. God is design, Grace is a covenant, a contract and codicils, what’s down there is writing” (64). It is a static system of basic ordinariness without potential for enlivening change and renewal, a state of affairs, for which the prison is a symbol, a “place of vicious, plodding *sequiturs*”(52). In later texts like *The Dick Gibson Show* and *The Franchiser*, together with *The Living End* perhaps his best books, Elkin widens his view and makes the ordinary a necessary part of self-definition and self-expansion, the self and the ordinary no longer just battling against, but now interacting with one another.

*The Dick Gibson Show* focuses on the dialectics of broadcasting, of voice and silence, voice and time, voice and audience, on the struggle between the voice’s controlling of silence, time, and audience and its *being* controlled by them, between the myth of heroic mastery over the medium and the trivialities of just filling silence and time. It is again the basic theme of postmodern fiction, namely somethingness against nothingness, human inventions against the void. These dichotomies and struggles define Dick Gibson’s professional career as a radio announcer and talkmaster. When “the announcer’s voice occur[s] in silence, in the heart of an attentive vacuum disposed to hear it” (104-05), Dick gives it a human dimension, a shape “creating a sense of the real silence held off, engaged elsewhere” (14). Listening to Bob Hope, Dick learns that “time [as the matrix of both the ordinary and the extraordinary] is the battleground of radio and the enemy as well; that he who stands up in it, as [Bob] Hope does, is a hero who has taken on the awesome task of making himself a medium of time’s mastery, his voice, his jokes, and his pauses ‘scheduling it, slicing it into thirty- and sixty-minute slices’” (P. Bailey 61). He learns that his

task is to “dispassionately enter the silence” (105) in order to tame it and humanize it for others and be a master of it himself. The radio, the voice of the ordinary, of communicability, which would normally de-individualize a person, is for Dick the very medium of self-expression and self-assertion. Though he identifies with the voice of ordinary American well-being and feels like the champion and symbol of the normal, he himself paradoxically wishes to transcend the ordinary as its mythic, extraordinary embodiment, hoping his life “would be as it is in myth” (323). In a kind of comic spirit, the various stages of Dick’s apprenticeship are modeled on the passage of the mythic hero; they are defined by trials, but also by support from helpers, by embarrassment and failure, but also by resurrection and feelings of elation; yet the stage of the ultimate ordeal, the initiation, does not lead to mastery and superiority. His life can only be “an interminable apprenticeship”, which “he saw now he could never end” (395). It is a confused, a medley life that he envisions, “touched and changed by cliché, by corn and archetype and the oldest principles of drama”, an “exceptional life [...] but familiar too, unconventional, but riddled with conventions of a different higher order” (131).

The drama that develops is that between communal spirit and private obsession, between stability and instability, satisfaction and desire. The antitheses are not centered in a character in spite of the fact that there is a central character, Dick Gibson, but instead are treated as abstractable attitudes, as alternative and contrasting approaches to life, as satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as self-reliance and self-alienation. Dick’s belief in the ordinary homogeneity of the American people, their shared values, and the image he has of his listeners, the ideal American family — “together in time, united, serene” (38) — turn out to be false. In part II and part III circumstances change with the change of the format of the talk show. The listeners in the final two-way version of his show become speakers, too, calling in with their problems, making “every home in America its own potential broadcasting station, and every American his own potential star” (283). The *diversity* of the voices of solitary people, their stories of private needs, longings, obsessions fill increasingly time, air, and silence, circling around missed chances, frustrated connections, ungratified relationships, controlling him, the moderator, with their patternlessness and narcissism, instead of

letting him control them by fostering communal values. Reacting to all these personal egocentric effusions on his Miami Beach “Dick Gibson’s Night Letters”, a program created to demonstrate and strengthen the public self and the nation’s solidarity, he laments full of disappointment, bewilderment, and defeat:

What’s happening to my program? What’s the matter with everybody? Why are we all so obsessed? I tell you, I’m sick of obsession [...] Where are my Mail Baggers, the ones who used to call with their good news and their recipes for Brunswick stew and their tips about speed traps between here and Chicago? How do your gardens grow, for Christ’s sake? What’s with the crabgrass [...] Have the kids heard from the colleges of their choice? *What’s happening?* (383)

What Dick comes to see is that “All there is [...] are the strange displacements of the ordinary” (274), i.e., mere self-disclosures of isolated selves. Ironically, only “Poor Dick Gibson”, the voice and the herald of the ordinary, “had nothing to confess [...] his own slate is clean, his character unmarked, his history uneventful” (274). If, as Dick claims, “the voice is the sound of the soul”, his soul is as much a void as the air into which he sends out his message of ordinary and communal values, and into which that imagined community of listeners wail and scream their compulsive confessions, private fears, and self-obsessed questions (which put them in a line with Sherwood Anderson’s “grotesques”). Finally, into his voice enters fear, fear of the extraordinary that can no longer be quieted with the mottos of the ordinary of the Dick Gibson show, “[p]lease remain calm”, “[p]lease be easy”. His life’s having failed to turn mythic, he himself becomes a suffering self by his unwillingness to accept the existence of different, public and private, levels of meaning.

This psychic burden is revealed in the workings of his imagination, which become fantastically paranoiac, just as they do in Pynchon’s books. It comes to be hyperactively obsessed with the figure of Behr-Bleibtreau who once disrupted his celebrity show and who now is turned into an evanescent, all-pervasive, and potent imaginary enemy caller seemingly bent on obstructing his show with a destructive vision contrary to the profane, ordinary one Dick offers. During a picnic for his listeners he keeps himself insulated from them, fearing that Behr-Bleibtreau would appear in person to harass him (which of course he never does). Thus the passionate

representative of ordinariness, of American common sense and communal spirit is disclosed, in Elkin's own words, as "bodiless being" (LeClair and McCaffery 121), obsessed with a fixed idea, as the symbol of the private, isolated and obsessed selves of his listeners, who in their compulsive individuality are the extraordinary, but who, by the commonness of their private, compulsive selves, ironically represent the repetitive, the ordinary so that the ordinary and the extraordinary fuse. Elkin's own comment on the book underlines the *paradox* as the central configuration of the text: "The paradox of the novel is that the enemy that Gibson has been looking for all his life is that audience. [...] Dick builds up in his mind this Behr-Bleibtreau character. That Behr-Bleibtreau is his enemy. That's baloney paranoia. The enemy is the amorphous public that he is trying to appeal to, that he's trying to make love to with his voice" (LeClair and McCaffery 121). Behind the solidarity exhibited in the ordinary and the communal spirit, it strives to show the world's terror and mysteries; the surface opens to the void. At the end Dick has to concede defeat. He in fact aligns himself with his listeners, all of them

blameless as himself, everyone doing his best but maddened at last, all, all zealous, all with explanations ready at hand and serving an ideal of truth or beauty or health or grace. Everyone — everyone. It did no good to change policy or fiddle with format. The world pressed in. It opened your windows (DGS 395).

In Elkin's *Living End*, the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary gains force by the subject matter to which it is applied, by the widening of the field of associations which includes the opposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar, of seeming and being, and by the plots of revelation and reversal. In the book, God, the most extraordinary source of creativity, justice, wholeness, etc., turns out to be ordinary. Before destroying the world He has created, He (rather unsatisfactorily) reveals and justifies his actions to a crowd assembled at his gala, asking "what do you make of Me, eh?" He goes on after a long explanation of his ways: "Who could have gotten it all right the first time, saved everyone trouble and left Hell unstocked? [...] Why do I do it then? Why?" The familiar answers come from the crowd: "'So we might choose,' said one of the saved [...] 'Goodness,' a saint shouted. 'You get off on goodness'" (LE

128-29). God's answer casts off these notions as clichés. His own explanation is rendered from an artist's point of view and serves to parody/satirize modernism's elitist, shamanic art-ideology:

Is that what you think? Were you born yesterday? You've been in the world. Is that how you explain trial and error, history by increment, God's long Slap and Tickle, His Indian-gift wrath? *Goodness?* No. It was Art! It was always Art. I work by the contrasts and metrics, by beats and the silences. It was all Art. *Because it makes a better story is why* (LE 129).

Elkin's God-Artist (a satire on the modernist artist's overblown self-estimation), in spite of his high claims, is quite ordinary in His egocentricity, His vindictiveness; He is "a sucker for worship" (93) with a "game show vision", with "a thing for heights [...] a sort of majestic Fop posed on postcard and practicing His Law only where there was a view" (127); He is a Bauhaus artist, "a form-follows-function sort of God" (48). Elkin, however, does not only make the extraordinary ordinary, he also gives the ordinary the aura of the extraordinary. Jesus says of his time on earth: "I loved it there [...] I loved being alive" (97), and the holy Mary is described as "savoring the ordinary" (133). God's critics, ironically, in a further turn of the screw, accuse Him of lacking "just ordinary earth" (127). God turns out to be a satiric/parodic symbol of the human need for wholeness, of the artist's need for aesthetic control — and of the failure of both.

Elkin says in a comment on the book: "I believe in whim. I believe in bad luck and in good luck, I believe that the world spins on an axis made out of whim, just pure whim. The ultimate whimmer is God". In fact, "God is the most whimsical thing in the universe" (Ziegler and Bigsby 102). The world was created by the whim of the artist God and is destroyed by his "controlled whim" (Elkin). The artist annihilates his work of art, His Creation, because: "I never found My audience" (LE 133). That is a paradoxical statement, because it means that, in spite of His omnipotence, God is powerless to *create* believers in His creation, which is an artistic creation with an attempted aesthetic control that fails miserably. The book, in which "everything [...] is built on some stereotyped notion of theology" (Ziegler and Bigsby 107), confirms what we have said about the abstraction of themes. The themes raise fundamental anthropological and theological oppositions, only then to blur the borderlines, the boundaries between God's power and character,

between power and powerlessness, between the extraordinary and the ordinary, the ethical and the aesthetic; and what is juxtaposed is presented in the ironic and comic modes to produce ambivalence and contradiction. Elkin notes: “in one way *The Living End* is the final working out of whatever is comic in my fiction by being the ultimate confrontation between all power and no power” (Ziegler and Bigsby 105); the antithesis of the ordinary and the extraordinary is a basic co-theme of the power theme.

#### 6.2.7.2. Donald Barthelme: *The Lost Middle State*

As we saw in Elkin, the ordinary vs. extraordinary paradigm gains a dramatic potential by its extension into the oppositions of familiar vs. unfamiliar (which adds the aspect of mystery to the narrative argument in *The Dick Gibson Show*) and of being vs. seeming, which provides surprise and imitates the plot of revelation and the effect of the reversal of position. Barthelme goes another way. In *Snow White*, he does not put a self into the center in order then to decenter it, and he does not dramatize the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary via the experience of the character or God or the narrator. Furthermore, he does not write in “a rapid, nervous, breathless tempo” (Howe), but rather practices a minimalistic prose full of discrepancies, gaps, stops, a technique of juxtaposition and omission, of fragmentation and montage that interrupts the linearity and easy flow of the text. But he does, just like Elkin, detach the ordinary and the extraordinary as *attitudes* from the character and thematize them as such, and he chooses a playful comic stance for a multi-perspective as well. In *Snow White*, Barthelme introduces the dialectic of the ordinary and the extraordinary into the world of fairytales (Snow White, Rapunzel, etc.), confronts it with the current world of America, and dramatizes the opposition of the two stances via the antitheses of boredom and excitement, the quotidian and the visionary, equanimity and disruption, knowledge and disorientation, the simple and the complex, the right and the wrong. They are localized in the character, in fact in all characters of the book, a method which, however, abstracts them from the individual psychic self and places them on a more general thematic level, since the characters, even Snow White, show an inner



life beyond utterances of confusion and complaint about both the excitement of the extraordinary and the boredom of the ordinary.

The design of the novel is not dominated by the linear experience of characters, as in Elkin, but by an extraordinary event, the event of the arrival of Snow White in the place of the Seven Dwarfs. This event changes the situation for everyone, takes away the familiarity of life, forces everybody, including Snow White, to adjust anew to the circumstances of the given and the (non)adjustment to this situation shapes the “plot” of the text, which fulfills itself, following the pre-given pattern of the fairy tales, in the antithesis of factuality (the quotidian) and vision (the romantic and heroic). For the seven dwarfs the arrival of Snow White is an “event” that introduces the extraordinary into the ordinary and brings confusion into their lives:

Before we found Snow White wandering in the forest we lived lives stuffed with equanimity [...] We were simple bourgeois. We knew what to do [...] Now we do not know what to do. Snow White has added a dimension of confusion and misery to our lives. Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity. We circle it wearily (*SW* 87-88).

Snow White, on the other hand, misses the extraordinary. Borrowing from Grimm’s fairy-tale “Rapunzel”, Barthelme makes her “recapitulate”, in a merging of fictional actuality and metafictional consciousness, the “motif” of “the long hair streaming from the high window [...] for the astonishment of the vulgar and the refreshment of my venereal life” (80), hoping for a prince to appear. Her extraordinary behavior calls forth a number of reactions. The question is what is “the significance of this act” (92), which is a liberating *act* for Snow White and a routine-breaking threatening *event* for everybody else. It initiates reflections about life in all who respond to it, including Snow White herself. She asks: “Paul? Is there a Paul, or have I only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui and pain?” (102). Her answer comes finally in a blurring of the actual fact of the present story and the recapitulation of the remembered, quite different story:

No one has come to climb up. That says it all. This time is the wrong time for me. I am in the wrong time. There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking. And with all those who did not come and at least *try* to climb up. To fill the role. And with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story (131-132).

The meeting between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the quotidian and the romantic/heroic produces mere “circling”, a blockage, entropy in behavior and thought, a circling that allows a range of perspectives on the event and on the reactions of the people to the event. The remarks of people are both trivial and meaningful, philosophical (cf. the allusion to Wittgenstein) and proverbial, but they come to no conclusion: “Leave things alone. It means what it means” (107); “if there is anything worse than being home, it is being out” (117); “you get a sense of ‘chain’ from these chain-like-fence walls” (127); “[o]ur becoming is done. We are what we are. Now it is just a question of rocking along with things as they are until we are dead” (128); “[e]veryone wanders around having his own individual perceptions. These, like balls of different colors and shapes and sizes, roll around on the green billiard table of consciousness” (129). The circling, the going to and fro, also affects the dwarfs, who, on the one hand, regret the confusion that has entered their lives with the arrival of Snow White, but who, on the other, now reject “[n]ormal life. [...] It is unbearable, this consensus, this damned felicity. When I see a couple fighting I give them a dollar because fighting is interesting” (66). These are resultative statements: they indicate a psychological irritation that, however, is not elaborated on. The calculated discrepancy between the indicated psychological issue and its non-psychological surface treatment makes whatever is complex simple again, thus establishing the contrast between issue and perspective. This discrepancy obviously has the purpose of gaining from the loss of complexity a wider range of viewpoints on the event and the freedom to open form for the force of simultaneity and the gap. The attitude in Barthelme’s texts towards the unrationalizability of life is an overlapping of rejection, acceptance, and assent that are neutralized into an irritated restraint and a *conceptual* dichotomy of complexity and simplicity; the gaps between juxtaposed (incompatible) components and different sorts of language leave space for the multiperspective that includes play,

irony, and the comic mode — but also anxiety. Thomas remarks in *The Dead Father*: “Things are not simple. Error is always possible [...] Things are not done right. Right things are not done. There are cases which are not clear. You must be able to tolerate the anxiety. To do otherwise is to jump ship, ethics-wise” (*DF* 119).

### 6.3. Space and Spatial Form

#### 6.3.1. Towards Modernism

In the eighteenth-century English novel, plot and character are localized in a concrete place and set in a specific time; both space and time function as coordinates of the narrated situations and their sequence. But space and time were not necessarily particularized; because the novels were composed more loosely, the manners of the time were taken for granted, the characters were free to act according to (universal) moral laws and as masters of their environment. Reality was not mysterious or opaque; place and time did not have the role of a determining context. Since the interest of the reader was supposed to focus on character and plot, space and time did not have to be detailed or given a stabilizing, meaning-giving or interesting role. In the Gothic novel things changed. The discourses of time and place served to set up a trap for the hero or heroine, to heighten suspense, or to articulate the romantic ideas of the beautiful and the sublime. With the introduction of history in the novels of Walter Scott, who combined the “novel of manners” that he inherited from Fielding and Smollett with the historical romance, not only the authenticity of local color became important (which is only a picturesque “decorative” device and cannot really awaken the spirit of the age), but also the lasting interaction between humans and place and time. This re-orientation among the elements of the situation gave the novel a crucial new direction.

Georg Lukács noted that Scott’s seemingly romantic novels were by no means so romantic but instead rested on the distinction between different realities, or milieus. “To awaken distant, vanished ages and enable us to live through them again he had to depict this concrete interaction between man and his social environment in the broadest manner” (1983, 40). Scott differentiated Scotland from England, the Highlands from the Lowlands, on the principle of

natural and cultural environment, the climate, regional history, social organization, manners, and traditions. Balzac and the realists of the nineteenth century eagerly followed the new trend of demonstrating how ideas, feelings, and manners of behavior grow out of such basic circumstances. Boundaries become important; time, space, and social organization within such boundaries fuse into effective operational principles. The growing complexity of the world in the nineteenth century, moreover, brings about within the novel a multiplicity of persons, plots, places, and even times, a phenomenon that intensifies emphasis on parallelism and juxtaposition and leads therefore to a strengthening of spatial order and its symbolic potential, and to a foregrounding of simultaneity. Narrative now includes the extensive description of places. Characters extend into place and time, place and time into character. George Eliot writes: "It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself" (366). The maxim of naturalism, the determination of character by milieu, which developed in the wake of Darwinism, furthers the close alliance between humans and space, the detailing of the social and natural environment and its evaluation as social determinants in the French (Zola), the English (George Eliot, George Moore) and the American novel (Garland, Crane, Norris, Dreiser). Two attitudes toward the environment develop that which Lukács characterizes as "experiencing" and "observing" and, according to the form, as "narrating" and "describing". He polemicized at the same time against both the latter choices (observing and describing) because such an attitude, for which Flaubert and Zola are taken to be the chief witnesses, is "neutral", creates tableaux, in which the characters act as "observers". They are thus reduced in their status and their role as self- and history-determining agents (*Essays* 1971A, 206-07). The reader too becomes an observer of a series of "pictures".

The modern novel interrupts this development towards description, or rather, it demands with Henry James the dramatizing, intensifying, and narrative integration of the pictorial elements under psychological aspects. This would mean "a reversal of the essential method of fiction" (Beach 38-39) as practiced in the traditional English novels, which Henry James regarded as "great fluid puddings" (qtd. in Booth 28). The modern novel became the "chamber of consciousness", depicted "the atmosphere of the mind"

that, in a mutual penetration of abstract consciousness and optic textual reality, turns “the very pulses of the air into revelations” (H. James 1957, 31-32). Narrative ontology is changed in the works of James (“art deals with what we see” [1962, 312]), in the works of Conrad (“my task [...] is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you *see*” [“Preface” x]), and in the works of other modernist writers. New dominants, reflecting new kinds of sensibility, come to the fore. The privilege of the narrator, his magisterial position “above” the world that he narrates, is given up or reduced; the distance between discursive statement and emotional experience is shortened. Bodily consciousness, the pictorial detail and symbolic signification take over the function of direct commentary, of rational and causal interpretation of character and event. According to T.S. Eliot and Theodor Adorno, only *indirect* methods that establish an “objective correlative” (T.S. Eliot) for feeling and thought can represent the whole experience in all its aspects, which include both conscious and unconscious signification. Emphasizing the spatial aspect of experience, Hemingway later will remark: “Unless you have geography, background, you have nothing” (Antheil 218). The aesthetic goal — to integrate all situational elements into a significant whole — causes the modernists to reject the excess of (unfunctional) description and its isolation in separate passages (traditionally at the beginning of chapters) that mark the “setting” of the characters. Virginia Woolf says that the modern novel “will tell us very little about the houses, incomes, occupations of its characters; it will have little kinship with the sociological novel or the novel of environment” (*Collected Essays*, 1966/67, II, 255), directing her criticism against the novels of authors like Bennett and Wells. Henry James, Joyce, Conrad, Virginia Woolf, and others, move from extensity to intensity, thus deepening the interrelation between subject and object, making it in fact indissoluble. Virginia Woolf writes: “What I want to do now is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes” (1973, 139). Such a fully saturated moment that gives wholeness to experience is the visionary or mythical moment, mentioned before. This moment of revelation suspends mechanical time and penetrates surface. But space is also important, for this psychic synthesis is a synthesis of the inner *and* the outer worlds. In

the intensity of psychic time, the character bridges the abyss between the inner and outer by the ecstatic feeling of totality, connecting the deep structure of consciousness and the depth dimension of nature, the essence of the mind and the essence of place (Conrad, *Lord Jim*; Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Lawrence, *The Rainbow*; Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*).

Time and space act as interpretative media not only by initiating responses from the experiencing subject and by opening ways of expressing feelings and thoughts in sensory perceptions, thus not only by providing material for indirect methods of signification; they also function as *systems* of interpretation in a complex aesthetic structure. As our discussion of the spatial method indicated, in modernism space becomes more important than on time. Space is the basis of elementary bodily consciousness, the structured and structuring stabilizer and matrix of meaning; it obtains the lead, when the discourses of time become problematical. Having lost the integrative wholeness of time sought by the nineteenth-century novel, the modernist writers split time into mechanical time and mental time. The two having become disconnected, psychological time wars against mechanical time in order to overcome transience, to create duration, permanence, and universality, in short, to make sense within the new wholeness of psychic time. Under these circumstances, the texts of Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, or Faulkner assign to space the role of a balancing factor, of a sound basis for the temporally disruptive narrative process. The novel creates meaningful constellations of places and directions, opposite poles that function as points of reference in the stream of consciousness, in the flow of associations between present and past, present and future, for the quest of identity, the substance of the self, and for the general thematic issue of transforming chaos into order and (universal) meaning. Place turns into a polarized, but coordinated and thematically directed environment that is not as in the naturalistic novel a social determinant, a (stifling) milieu, but, by being *experienced* as significant, becomes the receptor of feelings, thoughts, in fact a dialogue partner and the operative principle of human fears and hopes.

This is the case with Dublin in Joyce's *Ulysses*, London in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*; Yoknapatawpha County in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and more so in his *Absalom*,

*Absalom!* Place offers a refuge (Forster, *Howard's End*), the final goal of a quest (Lawrence, *Women in Love*), an alternative experience (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*), and a dialectic relationship (James, *The Ambassadors*). Or, place provides for mobility, change, and thus for the illusion of life as something dynamic and meaningful (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Sun Also Rises*; Kerouac, *On the Road*; Bellow, *Augie March*).<sup>96</sup> Space in fact becomes a symbolic and thematic *constellation*. In the American novel this modern symbolic configuration of space already informs the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, or Mark Twain. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the puritanical settlement with its moral rigor is set (ambiguously) against the natural wilderness and freedom of the forest. Melville's *Moby-Dick* contrasts land and sea, the ship and the sea, the surface and the depth of the sea, the human quest for universal meaning and nature's indifference. Mark Twain's *Roughing It* opposes civilization and the rough west; *Life on the Mississippi* and *Huckleberry Finn* contrast the wilderness and freedom of the river with the civilizational corruption on shore. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* plays on the interrelations between lighthouse and sea: the island, the sea and the lighthouse; the house and the island, the inside and the outside. Henry James's novels distinguish America and Europe, inexperienced, innocence and historic experience, morality and aesthetics. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* sets Africa against Europe, the deep inside of Africa against the accessible outer parts, the river Congo against the mythical forest; D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* contrasts the North and the South, coldness and heat; William Faulkner in "The Bear" opposes deforming history and the natural purity of the primeval forest; Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* frames exhausted civilization with the elementalness of nature.

This extension of space and the confrontation of places can be seen in a larger context. According to George Steiner, Western modern culture is confronted with a loss of spatial centrality, of "the confident pivot of a classic geography" (63). This is accompanied by the loss of the belief in the superiority of Western civilization as developed in Europe and America. A sudden void of classic values opens up, which had partly been filled by self-criticism, by the notion that Western civilization was exhausted in its striving for rationality, its arrogance, that it was full of hubris, was in fact an impostor, used

means and disguises to exploit the other races and continents, and needed the primeval as balance. The consequence is a geographical decentralization of the idea of culture. Culture is multiplied, serialized and “democratized” in its various manifestations. The result for the novel is that it loses its spatial self-containedness and its geographical, relatively homogeneous societal basis. Modern authors like Hardy, Lawrence, Conrad, Hemingway, and Faulkner gave expression to their dissatisfaction with society (as especially Melville had done before) by extending space not only into nature in terms of a new romanticism, but also into the *unfamiliar*. “[T]he pivot of a classic geography” (Steiner) and its self-contained value system, which include domesticated and ideologized nature as a pole *within* the cultural and philosophic systems, are no longer sufficient for the pursuit of the pressing epistemological and ethical questions in fiction. Thus the concept of the quest is “geographized” on a wider scale. Heroes are sent to the “primitive”, “mythic” regions of Egdon Heath (Hardy), of Africa (Conrad, Hemingway), Mexico (D.H. Lawrence, Bellow), or the Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi (Faulkner). Nature is set *against* culture, not in Rousseau’s terms as a friendly alternative and corrector of faulty civilizational developments, but as the quite “Other”, the basis of the mythical view, which is now placed against history, just as the moment of vision is set against the ordinariness of everyday life. Or, if one adheres to the familiar geographical centers, then the spatial “stability” of the city is at least partly dissipated by subjective, atmospheric sensibility (Henry James, Joyce, Virginia Woolf) or made into a (demonic) threat (Dreiser, Dos Passos). By showing the negative influence of civilization on the individual and on society, the dominance of the cultural over the natural frame is damaged, if not irreparably broken. The next step, at the end of modernism, is nature’s also losing its role as a retreat, compensation, or a balancing force (see Alcorn). With the common loss of orientation, place, or even names of places may finally be all that is left once the ideological positions have failed to make sense. Frederic Henry, the protagonist in Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, sees in place names alone the remaining truth in words:



I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain [...] I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory. [...] There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity [...] Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates (165).

### 6.3.2. Postmodern Fiction: Alternatives

As mentioned, according to Daniel Bell, the organization of space has “become the primary aesthetic problem of mid-twentieth-century culture, as the problem of time (in Bergson, Proust and Joyce) was the primary aesthetic problem of the first decades of this century” (107- 11).<sup>97</sup> As Gadamer has pointed out, relativity today is no longer experienced in terms of time but in terms of space, which means that time is defused in a context of simultaneity. The opposition between the known and the unknown, the near and the far away, one’s own culture and other cultures appears to be cancelled, steps into the background, or is not actualized. The result, however, is not that the extended space coordinates the different social cultures into a new integrated one, but that, conversely, space loses its existential and its social anchoring. It abandons its function as social, existential *place*. Anthony Giddens has called globalization “a process of uneven development that fragments as it coordinates” (175). Jameson notes that in this “new global space”, “our bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates” (1992, 49). Though the “postmodern hyperspace” (44) “has moved the closest to the surface of our consciousness, as a coherent new type of space in its own right” (49); it no longer has the “capacity for representation” (36). Being unarticulated as place, lacking the ability to create relations of familiarity or of ordinariness, this new space forms the basis of a postmodern or “hysterical sublime” (29), in which, as Jameson says in an interview, “it is the body [not the self, as in the modern sublime] that is touching the limit, ‘volatized,’ in this experience of images, to the point of being outside itself, of losing itself” (Stephanson 5). This new experience of global space is marked by the loss of human dominance over the spatial environment. Though the latter is produced by humans, it turns into a field of overpowering force all its own, and transcends “the capacities of the individual human body [...] to organize its immediate surroundings per-

ceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 1992, 44). To call this experience sublime, however, is problematic, given the diffusion this term has undergone. There are by now a confusing number of sublimes underway. The Jamesonian sublime, for instance, differs from Lyotard’s sublime by the fact that the latter is enabling, which the former is not — and both are quite different from the Kantian sublime.

For Jameson this new type of space that leads to physical and mental disorientation symbolizes “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multi-national and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (1992, 44). This also concerns art and architecture. Yet even under the circumstances sketched out by Jameson, views on the role of architecture and art in general may be either optimistic or pessimistic. While David Harvey’s analysis of the state of affairs in architectural urban space leaves little hope for the fruitful combination of aesthetic and social goals, Jameson calls for a reorientational “new political art” that “will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping” (54) and will achieve “a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last [the world space of multinational capital]” (54). Harvey notes, disapprovingly, another, not political but aestheticizing, postmodern approach to this kind of unpossessed abstracted space: “[T]he postmodernists see space as something independent and autonomous, to be shaped according to aesthetic aims and principles which have nothing necessarily to do with an overarching social objective” (D. Harvey 66). What Harvey notes of urban space is also true of postmodern narrated space, which suspends social purposes, static configurations, and fixed patterns, and, in Harvey’s words, emphasizes “fragmentation”, “the ephemeral”, and “uncertainty” (296). In fact, this penchant for deconstruction in postmodern art demonstrates — though with certain reservations — the preference for aesthetics over ethics (see Hoffmann and Hornung 1996).

Yet in spite of the abstraction of space, the sensory and spatial aspects of the fictional world do not lose their importance. They are only deployed differently. In terms of the situational duality of form and force, they serve the expression of energy, not of form. In Nietzsche’s physiological aesthetics, his aesthetics of force and

form, “the body and physiology” are “the starting point” for thought and art; indeed, it is “essential [...] to start from the *body* and employ it as guide”. Artists themselves are “full of surplus energy, powerful animals, sensual”, and all art exercises “the power of suggestion over the muscles and senses, which in the artistic temperament are originally active”(1968, 271, 289, 421, 427), and it breaks up the subject’s established hierarchies. For Heidegger, following Nietzsche, “the sensuous, the sense-semblant, is the very element of art”, since “[a]ll being is in itself perspectival-perceptual, and that means [...] ‘sensuous’” (1991, 73, 213). Interpreting Nietzsche, Vattimo writes that form is “forever being exploded by a play of forces, of particular forces, namely the body’s instincts, sensuality and animal vitality” (1993, 105). Lyotard, pursuing the same train of thought, speaks in favor of visual narrative and turns against the common privileging of the linguistic over the sensory, the discursive over the visible, because only the perceived particular guarantees difference and plenitude. Seeing difference creates force, transgresses the categories, deconstructs the system, and protects us from the abstractions of wholeness and metaphysics (1971, 14-15); it privileges the particular over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, and the subconscious over the conscious.

Susan Sontag, together with Leslie Fiedler among the first to pay critical attention to the emerging new art, turns against modernist reductionist aesthetics and incites us to “recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more”. With reference to Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year at Marienbad*, she emphasizes the importance of “the pure, untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of some of its images, and its rigorous if narrow solutions to certain problems of cinematic form” (1961, 9). Indeed, “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (14). Ihab Hassan, another of the early theorists of postmodern art and culture, notes that in postmodernism, “truth inheres in the visible” (1982, 108), in the surface view, because surface representation provides (true) appearances and no (false) depth views. John Barth advises the writer of prose fiction that “its visual verbality, and its translation of all sense stimuli into signs, are precisely the ones that we should pay the most attention to” (Bellamy 1974, 4). William Gass says in an interview: “For me fiction isn’t an alternative to anything [...] and it doesn’t strive for universals. It merely makes particular things out of universals”

(Bellamy 1974, 35), and in his novel *The Tunnel* Kohler notes: “feeling is something you breathe” (412). It is remarkable that in all these statements, in spite of the privileging of the sensuous and the perceived particular, scarcely anything is said about the individual subject who sees, hears, and feels, while much is made of the liberation from constraints both social and intellectual.

Both modern and postmodern fiction argue for the visual and the particular, yet there are decisive differences as to what the visual and particular mean. Joyce and Hawkes can be seen as examples. Behind the hermetic Joyce emerges quite a different Joyce: the enemy of abstraction, the creator of numberless small sensory details that make up the everyday life and function as the projection of our souls. Hawkes notes: “My fiction is almost totally visual and the language depends almost totally on image” (Bellamy 1974, 104). Like Joyce, Hawkes has an “interest in exploiting the richness and energy of the unconscious”, but he follows more Kafka’s example, for he “believe[s] in coldness, detachment, ruthlessness” (Bellamy 1974, 104), attitudes he believes he needs for focusing his material on the “theme”, on sensuality, sexuality, violence, and destruction. The “unfamiliar or invented landscape helps me to achieve and maintain this detachment” (Dembo and Pondrom 16), since it serves as a matrix for simultaneity, supports the application of multiperspective, makes all perspectives relative, and asserts the paradoxical split nature of human existence and the comic disparity of human dreams and drives. Postmodern narrative deconstructs the modernist concepts of space, just as it decomposes the notions of time, character, and plot, insofar as they promote the dimensions of form and order in the narrated situation and its meaning. Don DeLillo has rightly noted that in spite of the demand for “visual verblativity” (Barth) “[t]here isn’t a strong sense of place in much modern writing”. Speaking in fact about the postmodern novel, he distances himself from this tendency: “I do feel a need and drive to paint a thick surface around my characters. I think all my novels have a strong sense of place” (DeCurtis 62), an assertion which is only partly accurate because he only emphasizes places and objects like the supermarket and the TV, stressing rather what people do or not do and thus confirming (mildly) the trend he describes.

Under the auspices of force, a flexibilization of space occurs, which leads — as in other fields — to paradoxical arrangements.

First, the dissolution of the seemingly indissoluble unity of subject and object causes the separation of character and environment; they become *detached* from one another and no longer form an “objective” or “subjective” unity. Second, space itself splits into *space* and *place*, place representing containment, circumscription, milieu, and *form*, whereas space — indefinite, infinite, and fluid — incorporates *force*. As always in postmodern fiction, the positions are not fixed. Both space and place can become ambivalent in their positions; their role in the meaning-scheme of the text can be played with, even reversed. An example of this is Elkin’s *The Dick Gibson Show*. The protagonist of the novel defines himself not by individual place, as one would expect, but by homogenizing place into space, sterilizing local surfaces, and denying geographical differences; he sees himself as “Dick Gibson of Nowhere, of Thin Air and the United States of America Sky” (21), “the generalized sound of American life” (105). The social frame (character, role, action/event) and the natural frame (space, time) of the situation need not but may be manipulated independently of its unity.

In principle, the representation of space follows the designs of montage: it is not ideologized as “setting”, “environment” or “milieu” or made use of as initiator of, or reactor to, existential feelings and thoughts. It becomes decentered and rejects the idea of “reality”, recognizability, human plausibility, or logical consistency. This means that space is not only free to be detailed or left vacant (because the continuity of space and time never can break off), but it is furthermore fantasized so that it can be free to be differentiated or *de*-differentiated, to be localized or synthesized, or to build or disrupt (together with time) the creative “natural” basis for new imaginary worlds. In space, too, the possible and imaginary replace the stable and allegedly given. Barth has written — like Henry James or Lawrence Durrell before him — about the “Spirit of Place”. He turns against the old idea of a realistic setting: “The very notion of place, or ‘setting,’ realistically evoked as a main ingredient of fiction, is no doubt as suspect at this hour of the art as are the conventions of realistic characterization or linear plot as practiced by our literary great-grandparents” (1984, 128). One should feel

free to come to new terms with both realism and antirealism, linearity and nonlinearity, continuity and discontinuity. If the term ‘postmodern’ describes anything worthwhile, it describes this freedom, successfully

exercised. [...] The 'postmodern' writer may find that the realistic, even tender evocation of place (for example) is quite to his purpose, a purpose which may partake of the purposes of both his modernist fathers and his pre-modern remoter ancestors without being quite the same as either's (1984, 129).

Barth's references to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, to Borges, and to Calvino's *Invisible Cities* make clear that he thinks of a kind of "irrealistic" (Barth echoing Borges) transformation of "realistic" space and its world of objects. The spirit of free transformation, of "irrealism" suspends and makes manipulable, or rather, exchangeable, not only the categories of reality and fiction but also those of sameness and difference, and thus transgresses the system of categorization in general. Actuality and possibility take the place of categories. Again in Barth's words, "at one point the Khan [in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*] observes that perhaps all these invisible cities are variations of Venice: that Marco Polo has never left home. That is the sort of Landgeist which may still haunt and inspire us in the closing decades of twentieth-century fiction" (1984, 129). In fact, Calvino's book shows nothing but transformation, metamorphosis, and change; there are possible cities within or around the actual ones. The only historically real one mentioned is Venice. Calvino writes in *Invisible Cities*:

[D]ifferences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances, a shapeless dust cloud invades the continents. [...] The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born (108-9).

For the presentation of space in the postmodern novel, three factors are important that all converge in their deconstructive tendency but do not necessarily combine in individual authors or texts; in fact, they are in part mutually exclusive but together demonstrate the higher flexibility, the reign of possibility, not actuality, also in the approach to space. First, the appearance-disappearance paradigm reigns in the presentation of space; second, space is liberated from the concept of (determinate) milieu, from the projection of the inner into the outer, and from elaborate description; and, third, movement is transformed into a mere operation in space and time: beginning, end and goal are lost or suspended.

### 6.3.3. Appearance and Disappearance

The representation of place and space in postmodern fiction can be understood in terms of what Virilio has called the replacement of the “aesthetics of appearance” by the “aesthetics of disappearance”.<sup>98</sup> The aesthetics of appearance asserts place-identity and a sense of rootedness, creates spaces and times of individuation and of social or universal connection, and establishes a coherent perspective of continuation; it opposes spatial and social disaffection and barrenness, the merely insignificant and superficial. Against the fleeting, the ephemeral, and the fortuitous are set patterns of denial, hope, meaning, and utopian perfection. The postmodern aesthetics of disappearance denotes the vanishing of time and space as palpable meaning-giving areas of social life. In this sense, it is a reaction to a change in reality, or rather, in the sense of reality. It ultimately *cancels difference* and *depth*, and it does away with the consolation by place of which Hemingway speaks.

In Beckett’s *Malone Dies* there is no externality; there are no roads, forests, bicycles or crutches as there are still in *Molloy*. Malone only possesses a notebook, a pencil, and a hooked stick for opening and closing the skull space of his room. Increasingly foregrounded in Beckett’s trilogy are stasis, inertia, exhaustion, and the labyrinth of (mental) repetition and confusion, all of which come across as entropic by the loss of movement, that is, by the dynamics of force. *The Unnamable* has no definable plot, no namable character, no describable setting and no chronological time flow. The forms of the book are repetition, contradiction, and question. The book starts: “Where now? Who now? When now?” (*Moll* 293) In Beckett’s “Imagination Dead Imagine”, the places vanish into space; the narrating voice is bound to a vague rotunda and skull-like enclosure.

Robbe-Grillet’s spatial universe contains, in Borges’s phrase, a “fundamental vagueness” (*Fic* 19), “the indefinite light of a rainy landscape” (*Voy* 4), the “labyrinth of streets” (*Era* 43), a “labyrinth of unlighted hallways” (*IL* 97). In the first paragraph of *In the Labyrinth*, the narrator notes, in a manner reminiscent of Beckett, that outside it is both rainy and sunny, cold and hot, windy and calm. A few pages later he describes an object on the table as a cross, a knife, a flower, a human statuette; it could in fact be “anything” (72).

The preface to Robbe-Grillet's novel *In the Labyrinth* rejects all depth associations, stating that the "reality in question is a strictly material one; that is subject to no allegorical interpretation" (28).

Five writers who become influential for American postmodernists, Kafka, Beckett, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov, write only surfaces, and even the surfaces may be suspended. America is seen by Baudrillard as the best example of the disappearance of social rootedness and density, the loss of the authenticity of place; in his words (referring to Virilio): "the America of desert speed", of "social desertification", is a model of "the inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world" (1988a, 5). This superficiality brings about the dissolution of the regulating order of the social world, of hierarchical distinction and of totalizing form, of the distinction between nature and culture, surface and depth, the outer and the inner, the true and the false, between negation and affirmation, reality and fiction.

Also abandoned are the particulars of everyday life. Vonnegut explicitly rejects the routine world of the quotidian, an attitude that would be underwritten by most of his postmodern colleagues: "I do not furnish transportation for my characters; I do not move them from one room to another; I do not send them up the stairs; they do not get dressed in the mornings; they do not put the ignition key in the lock, and turn on the engine, and let it warm up and look at all the gauges, and put the car in reverse, and back out, and drive to the filling station, and ask the guy there about the weather. You can fill a good-size book with this connective tissue" (Bellamy 1974, 201). Federman writes that the "new fictitious creature will be [...] unconcerned with the real world" (1975, 13). Time and space are solely the objects of imagination and reflection. Sukenick speaks of "a series of overwhelming social dislocations" (DN 41).

These dislocations do not make place and things disappear, but the natural framework of the situation is no longer intimately bound up with the social level of the situation, with character and action, with environment and milieu. The outer no longer functions as the projection of the inner. In *Snow White*, there are no descriptions of the place where Snow White and the dwarfs live, nor of streets or cities, while many references to an American setting open up a comic contrast between the archetypal milieu of the fairy tale



and the civilizational circumstances of the present. Gass notes that *Omensetter's Luck* “really says nothing at all about the 1890s, nothing about the Ohio river towns, of which I have no knowledge whatever. Fiction, goddamn it, is fiction. When will that simple truth be acknowledged? The same thing is true of most of the stories” (LeClair and McCaffery 164).

The method of voiding space not only produces *emptiness*; it also provides the opportunity to play with the *absence-presence* constellation, a strategy which again, though in a different way, serves to establish the *force*-aspect of the narrated situation. The dimension of nothingness is created by leaving open in the description of space “unnatural” and mysterious gaps of emptiness, which, however, do not elude control. Control over emptiness is retained by play, by blurring the borderlines, for instance between representative and the textual levels, as in Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*. In this novel the spatial placement of people and occurrences does not go beyond the indication of an unidentified house or restaurant, a bar, a nightclub; yet when a place is specified it is *mystified*. The handling of place is included in the book’s overall strategy, which aims at a violation of logical continuity, a fusion of ontological planes, of “somethingness” with “nothingness”. It points at the opposition of seeming and being, and finally at an overall uncertainty. Thus placement in space is both established and dissolved. The cabin that Martin Halpin and Ned Beaumont inhabit is

a rather odd house, to say the least. There is the living room and the den, but we have not been able to find any other rooms. It *seems* as if there are other rooms, but when we approach them, they are — I don’t quite know how to put this — they are simply *not there!* There is no kitchen, no porch, no bedrooms, no bath. At the side of the living room, a staircase leads “nowhere”. Oh, I don’t mean to say that it disappears into empty space, it simply leads to a kind of ... haziness, in which one knows there is *supposed* to be a hallway and bedroom doors: but there is absolutely nothing. Neither Ned nor I dare to say what is uppermost in our minds, that is, that if we walked into this haziness, we would walk somehow into another dimension. (Ned thinks — wishful thinking! — that we might walk into another book!) (*MS* 30)

This opposition of something and nothing on the referential level can be both radicalized and attenuated by contrasting the referential and the textual dimensions of narrative. When Halpin (to whom already his “quiet life [...] was fantastic” [152]) walks to a

nearby “town”, he has fantastic experiences that obfuscate the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between presence and absence, seeming and being, but also between “reality” and art. There “were trees in a kind of generic way, ‘typical’ trees. They looked amazingly like drawings. The sun was above and behind me and did not, throughout my walk, move. I cast no shadow”. Looking back at the cabin they lived in, Halpin thinks: “There it sat, certainly recognizable but curiously odd-angled, strangely lopsided in effect, as if lacking first one dimension, then another [...] Even more curious (I might even say chilling) was that the upper story, viewed now from *outside*, was no more substantial than the same story *inside*”. Then “I saw before me a town! Or let me record that it was not *quite* a town. By this I mean that it was rather bizarrely and unnervingly unfinished, with buildings here and there composed of front walls and doors only, others having (like our cabin) vague and unfinished stories, and streets that stopped short and beyond which were vast expanses of mist and sky”. Pointing from the fictional actuality of the text to that of another text, using intertextuality as a constructive principle for heightening uncertainty or rather multidimensionality, Sorrentino opposes (playfully) referential and textual levels. Halpin finds out that “[t]he town, by the way, was begun by an American novelist who abandoned it to become a journalist;” it actually “existed in a typescript locked away in a trunk in a Poughkeepsie attic” (*MS* 153-54); he felt assured that his author Lamont would not find him there.

#### **6.3.4. Significant Oppositions: Closure and Openness, Sameness and Difference, The Inanimate and the Animate**

Space is not just a place to be filled with things, houses, people, traces of the past, expectations of the future; it is also the basis for the creation of significant oppositions that determine as oppositional matrices the whole narrative process and its meaning-giving function. They are closure and openness, sameness and difference, the inanimate and the animate. The most important form of the closure-openness paradigm used in fiction is the *prison-escape* or *prison-rescue* pattern (see Dickens, Hawthorne, Melville, Conrad). It appears in postmodern fiction in various modes, which Gass’s *The Tunnel*, Federman’s *The Voice in the Closet*, Barthelme’s *Snow*

*White*, and in passing Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Elkin's *Dick Gibson Show* may exemplify.

In Gass's *The Tunnel*, time is the prison. Place gives time presence as its substratum, makes time a subject, not only an object and receptacle for developments and actions. It is a one-place novel, in which things accumulate and store up time, making time's continuous presence a burden, even a threat. According to Professor Kohler, the main character in the novel, history "is not a mighty multitude of causes whose effects we suffer now in some imaginary present; it is rather that the elements of every evanescent moment endeavor to hitch a ride on something more permanent, living on in what lives on" (315), i.e., living on "inside its surroundings — in objects, [...] in my mother's rings, my aunt's nested boxes, my father's car — in the dregs of every day where my life composts itself — rots, warms, blends, bursts into flame — [...] in uncapped tubes of toothpaste, in rime on grass and leaves, in — in short — things seemingly trivial, things set aside or overlooked, things apparently passing which nevertheless abide in either themselves or their duplicates" (314-15). Kohler is prisoner of the house, of the past, of the constraints of life and knowledge that have become traps. The familiarity of things in the house, their (quasi-independent) links to the past, to the confining circumstances of his life, the estrangement from his wife, press on his mind and cut him off from the possibility of renewal, of expanding his consciousness:

Hard to get about the house, however, even if pacing is really needed, not alone because of my books or her bureaus, but because of the memories I have to skirt, the clutter of old arguments I have to step over, the bruised air which can scarcely bear another blow, [...] odors of anger and bitterness in curtains, in corners, tables I dare not touch for fear of the tears turned to dust I'll carry off on my fingers, every object in the house an image through which my thoughts will unwillingly pass into an intolerable past. [...] the house is an historical trap whose dangers drive me along an increasingly narrower path (463-644).

Kohler digs a tunnel in the basement of his house — as a fantastic, surreal and mental act of resistance — in order to escape "from the camp" (148), from the felt absurdity of his existence. He leads a double-coded life above in the house and below inside the earth, with burdening time and liberating space. Space, in a typically paradoxical manner, is both the preserver of the time passed in the house and the

means of escaping from time and place into the undefined, elemental space of the earth. Some remnants of the modernist identity and alienation theme remain here visible, though they are transformed into the fantastic mode. In fact, Kohler's dilemma is a postmodern version of the crisis of the modernist split self, expanded into a crisis of the sense of reality, history, and knowledge, and symbolically expressed in the vertical opposition between above-ground and below-ground, between the site of human life above and the mystery of the earth below, of form and force (the tunnel as symbol will be dealt with below).

While in *The Tunnel* the mass of things and their suggestions of time passed establish a trap, a trap can also be indicated ex negativo by the absolute emptiness of space, the failure to mention of place and things. This is Federman's case. The vacuity of space and the failure to mention time here paradoxically testify to the presence of time, of the burden of the past, its existential dimension. Federman shuns place, and in his novels the firm placedness of people changes into a "condition of placelessness" (Lutwack 216). *To Whom It May Concern* is narrated "without any mention of time and place"; everything appears "on a timeless vacant stage without scenery. No names of places. No decor. Nothing" (164). The reason lies in the author's traumatic experience as a child. The closet in *The Voice in the Closet* is the place where his mother hid him as a boy to save him from deportation by the Nazis, while the rest of his family was sent to Auschwitz and was killed there. Indeed, "the closet moment" is his "real birthdate"; it gave him an "excess of life" (Federman 1989, 64), yet it remains unspeakable — quite in accordance with Wittgenstein and Lacan's views that feelings and especially such excruciating feelings cannot be expressed in language. However, the closet is also a kind of "phantasmic repository" (Kennedy 500), the driving impulse for narration. It is both a place of closure and of opening. In Federman's case the displacing/replacing of the closet is the hiding/revealing strategy of an existential pain that is unable to face the past that is, however, unavoidably there and forms a trap. Only storytelling can rescue the mind from closure. This paradoxical method of "placing" by displacing, or displacing by placing falls in step — and not accidentally — with the absence/presence, narration/void figurations of postmodern storytelling in general.

In Barthelme's *Snow White*, the prison situation is different. It is determined by the dialectic of imprisonment and rescue. Prisoner and liberator are not the same person — the princess is the prisoner, the prince the (failing) rescuer — a constellation that creates not only a personal condition but also a *pattern*, the pattern of the fairy tale. As so often in postmodern fiction, the establishment of the pattern and the breaking of the pattern are the means of freeing narrative energy. For the liberation of narrative force, Barthelme literalizes the Snow White story but also changes almost every detail of Grimm's version, making it contemporary, placing it in the US, and combining the legendary fairy tale with other tales, especially Grimm's "Rapunzel". What for Snow White in Grimm's fairy tale is a place of refuge from the evil plans of the jealous queen, the house of the Seven Dwarfs, is in Barthelme's novel turned into a prison, not literally a prison but a place signifying the prison-character of the world, of the ego and the language. The term used for the state of inertia, of boredom and paralysis in *Snow White* is the topical word "alienation", now embedded in a typically distorting, ironizing form of metaphor with an unexpected, extravagant, and bizarre term of comparison: "alienation seep[ed] in everywhere and cover[ed] everything like a big gray electric blanket that doesn't work, after you have pushed the off-on to the 'on' position!" (131) Snow White yearns for something new: "OH I wish there were some [new] words in the world" (6). She writes a "dirty great poem four pages long" (10), which disturbs everybody's equilibrium.

Rescue must come from outside; self-escape is impossible. Mental horizons are fixed by standard discourses that preclude the view of alternative possibilities. One of the dwarfs poses the questions: "TRYING to break out of this bag that we are in. What gave us the idea that there was something better? How does the concept, 'something better,' arise?" (179). The impeded force of the imagination fails to think of an alternative — a condition documented in Snow White's (and the others') spiritless language, bound as it is to the business and consumer world. Though she remarks, "[m]y imagination is stirring [...] like the long-sleeping stock certificate suddenly alive in its green safety-deposit box because of new investor interest", she has to admit to the dwarfs (answering their question why she stays with them) that, "It must be laid, I suppose, to a failure of the imagination. I have not been able to

imagine anything better!’ *I have not been able to imagine anything better*” (59).

Quite logically, Snow White looks for help from the outside. But for that she has to change her role. She takes up the role of Rapunzel, hanging her long black hair out of the window for a prince to climb up and literally liberate her from her prison. The Rapunzel motif serves to pinpoint the prison-escape motif in symbolic terms and thus to focus the story. Snow White understands the mythic significance of letting down her hair: “This motif [...] is a very ancient one. [...] Now I recapitulate it, for the [...] refreshment of my venereal life” (80). The role of the prince, here named Paul, is to rescue from outside what cannot be liberated from inside, in fact to manifest the romantic idea of a noble prince, which, however, turns out to be just another self-imprisoning cliché nurtured by the imagination. He follows the basic overall scheme of the book, the shattering of expectations. While Snow White waits for the heroic prince to save her, Paul turns into a comical anti-hero, unable to act. He fails both as a prince and as the artist that he strives to be. After he has seen Snow White Rapunzel-like hanging her black hair suggestively out of the window, he says: “It has made me terribly nervous, that hair. It was beautiful I admit it. [...] why some innocent person might come along, and see it, and conceive it his duty to climb up, and discern the reason it is being hung out of that window. There is probably some girl attached to it, at the top, and with her responsibilities of various sorts” (13-14).

Paul then runs away from his “responsibility”. Yet his attempt to flee the mental prison that his role as fairy-tale prince bestows on him is again ironized. His quest for escape becomes another sample of failure, the failure to escape from his pre-assigned role; Snow White’s failure to be rescued is thus paralleled by the prince’s failure to escape the role of rescuer. Paul hides in a monastery in Western Nevada, escapes the Order, “hides” in Spain, gives lectures to the French, has another experience of defeat in the post office in Rome, and returns to the monastery. Reflecting on the motives of his behavior, he connects them, in a time-jump, to contemporary, twentieth-century, social conditions, seeing the reason for his behavior in the lack of opportunity for heroic action in our time. When he finally decides to return and fulfill his princely role, again pattern and fulfillment of the pattern stay far apart. He

vacillates, meditates, and filters his reactions through the clichés of literary and cultural conventions. Unable to act, he becomes a mere voyeur, digs a bunker outside Snow White's house, and installs an observation system, which includes mirrors and dogs. He ironically fulfills his princely role of finally rescuing her in quite a different way from what was expected: by drinking the poisoned Vodka Gibson intended for Snow White by the evil Jane. His last words are pure, inadequate banality: "This drink is vaguely exciting, like a film by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson" (174), and he dies with "green foam coming out of his face" (175).

Imprisoned in traditional discourses and clichéd ideas, Snow White rejects another wooer while waiting for the princely rescuer Paul: "But this 'love' must not be, because of your blood. [...] I must hold myself in reserve for a prince or prince figure, someone like Paul. I know that Paul has not looked terribly good up to now and in fact I despise him utterly. Yet he has the blood of kings and queens and cardinals in his veins" (170). She realizes that the fault may not lie in Paul alone but in our expectations of him: "Paul is a frog. He is frog through and through [...] So. I am disappointed. Either I have overestimated Paul, or I have overestimated history" (169). When Snow White sadly decides to pull back in her black hair she resignedly remarks: "No one has come to climb up. That says it all. This time is the wrong time for me. [...] There is something wrong with all those people standing there, gaping and gawking" (131-32). The book concludes in an open-ended finale with another ironization and trivialization of patterns, the happy ending of the fairy tale, and the liberating gain of new experience and knowledge through mobility and quest:

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE  
 REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE  
 APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE  
 SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY  
 THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF  
 A NEW PRINCIPLE  
 HEIGH-HO (181)

The final issue is the wrongness of the pattern, of the time, of the place, of people and actions and of language, or, in other words, the prison-likeness of the world, the ego and the tale ("we exist in different universes of discourse", 44), and the impossibility of escape

or rescue because of the distressing lack of possibility, of “something better” — all this, however, rendered in a playful, ironic, and comic mode. Though the book does not proffer escape or rescue from an unchangeable state of confusion, it does offer the character and the narrator a choice of attitude. The choices are resignation, acceptance, assent, or rebellion and the play with them. These attitudes are treated in the book as (abstract) possibilities of response more or less unrelated to specific characters and without an effect of change on the character or the situation.

Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* provides another version of the prison-escape motif, though it is here generalized into the opposition closure/waste and openness/freedom. The central spatial paradox in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is that people desire openness and despise closure but in fact cannot bear openness and must fill it with the “system” of rationalities, categorizations, hierarchies, and power structures in order to save at least the illusion of dominating the world, while in fact they drive it to entropy. The quest for freedom, openness, for escape from waste and suppression leads to paranoia, tires the quester after futile acts of resistance against the System, results in a mental state of exhaustion and passivity, and in the extreme case, as with Slothrop, in death (see also Stencil in *V.*, Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*).

The protagonist in Elkin’s *The Dick Gibson Show* imagines that he lives in “what I think and nothing else”. As a “voice” on a radio (251), he has an “undeveloped [...] sense of place” (190), though, or perhaps because, he “had crisscrossed the country, leaping in and out of landscape, stitching my wild, erratic journey” (141). For him it is “as if all place — all place — was ridiculous, a comedown [...], the material world itself existing only as obstacle, curiously unamiable” (170), as a prison. Yet this openness of space that he thinks he dominates takes its revenge. It “hitches a ride” on all the voices that finally stream back at him in his two-way show and fill him up with fear and hallucinations, thus transforming his mind into the prison of the self.

A somewhat different version of the closure - openness dialectic is the *sameness-difference* opposition. As Pynchon demonstrates in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, radical openness in time and space is only a speculative possibility, not one that can be actualized. The human being cannot bear to confront emptiness, chaos, which is



included in openness. Even ungeneralized particularity of things and places and *difference* as value (as force) may disturb the human mind, since they question the human dominance over situations; *sameness* then comes to the rescue as synthesizing form, as a version of closure, and transforms and domesticates the openness of the land. This is the case in Elkin's *The Franchiser*, where the protagonist fills America with the chains of hotels and fast-food services, so that it is the same, always recognizable America all over the continent and the traveler feels at home wherever he or she goes. This stream-lining of differences of course does not work. Difference as counter-principle asserts itself, and the void opens in the course of time in every individual existence, though the attempt is always made to bring all specific entities into line. Sameness can also be the target of criticism. In Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, the author Anthony Lamont writes about his earlier novel *Rayon Violet* to a Professor Roche: "You are right that Indianapolis and New York are interchangeable in this novel, and that the names of streets, parks, restaurants, etc., are identical: I thought to use this technique to get across my feeling that our world has become featureless" (22). Difference and particularity give things, like people, a certain individuality and independence; sameness heightens the feeling of control and counteracts the fear of the void. Or so it seems, until sameness dissolves individuality and starts to control the world as anonymous civilizational space, as system with its own, anonymous laws.

Finally, the *inanimate-animate* dichotomy reflects the closure-openness opposition. The reversal of the relationship of dominance between the social and the natural frames of the situation, i.e., the dominance of the inanimate that swallows up the animate, signifies (mechanical) closure. In the system of signification, inanimate things then proliferate and the difference between human subjects and material objects becomes tenuous at best, if not cancelled. In modernism, the nature novel from Hardy to Lawrence and Woolf had opened up the borderlines between the animate and the inanimate in order to mark the depth-dimension of life and the unconscious. In the epiphanic experience of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the *abandoning* of the self to the sphere of inanimate things and the *finding* of the self in it are the same thing because there is a universal connection and harmony among everything that exists: "It was odd, she thought, how if one was

alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus [...] as for oneself” (101). This intimate relation to things of nature is gone in postmodern fiction; nature indeed has lost its function as a consoling frame of reference; instead “thingness” takes over and blurs the difference between the animate and the inanimate. In Gass’s “The Icicles” from *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories*, Charley Fender, a real estate salesman, adopts from his revered boss, Mr. Pearson, the “beautiful belief” that “properties were like people” (150), and indeed that “*property owns people*” (152); his life “vanished so completely [...] that he couldn’t tell the story of his life” (61). Fender becomes as inanimate as the things around him, finally identifying himself with the icicles at his house. Gass says: “The central images I wanted to develop led to [...] the idea of the icicles as a kind of property, then as part of real estate” (LeClair and McCaffery 168). Barthelme in *Snow White* speaks of the “trash phenomenon” that “may very well soon reach a point where it’s 100 percent”, so “that we want to be on the leading edge of” it, “the everted sphere of the future” (*SW* 97); Lois Gordon rightly notes that objects define “Barthelme’s people” (67), though in a playful spirit. Tony Tanner writes that Pynchon’s *V.* “is full of dead landscapes of every kind — from the garbage heaps of the modern world to the lunar barrenness of the actual present. On every side there is evidence of the ‘assertion of the Inanimate’ [...] the proliferation of inert things is another way of hastening the entropic process. On all sides the environment is full of hints of exhaustion, extinction, dehumanization”. Indeed, as Pynchon writes in *V.*, “the world started to run more and more afoul of the inanimate” (467). Tanner sees in this the “acceleration of entropy”, which is “perhaps the most inclusive theme of the book” (1971, 159; 158).

### 6.3.5. Liberation: Abstraction and Fantastication

The inanimate, however, does not only signify closure. It becomes at least ambiguous if not liberating in its function when it signifies disorder within bourgeois order. As a listing of inanimate items, it introduces disorder and incongruity into the order of the situation and its language. It may create a new openness by de-

constructing the accustomed central perspective on space and the order of the image and by fashioning a new form that focuses on discrepancy, even chaos. Objects are released, set free from order, reason, determination, though they still may be attached to a character and reflect his or her (liberating) oddity, as in an early postmodern text, Gaddis's *The Recognitions*. This disorder is double-coded. It reflects the disorder behind the façade of order in society and the resistance of the individual against social hypocrisy. In this book, Wyatt Gwyon, an artist who resents bourgeois order and the faked, civilized surface-existence and who suffers from the impossibility of creating great art in the corrupt society of counterfeiters, of whom he becomes himself one, works in a room that is full of

the litter which had gradually filled the undetermined room until it belonged to him. Things were tacked on the walls there haphazard, an arm in dissection from a woodcut in the *Fabrica* of Vesalius, and another sixteenth-century illustration from the *Surgery* of Paré, a first-aid chart called "the wounded man;" a photograph of an Italian cemetery flooded by the Po; a calendar good for every day from 1753 to 2059; a print of a drawing of the head of Christ by Melozzo da Forlì; a ground plan of the Roman city of Leptis Magna; a mirror; and rolls of paper and canvases on stretchers leaning in the corners (93).

The things that in Wyatt's case are still contained within the circumference of a specific room then become independent. They turn into a mere *list*. The list of items in the following example from Gass's *The Tunnel* seems to concretize the contents of a shop, but it has paradoxically the contrary effect of *not* specifying the place, but rather isolating the articles in a merely serial formation that has its only significant coherence in the memory of professor Kohler, or rather, in the verbosity of language:

The *Harding High Sweetmeet Shop* was a far larger establishment than the others. It sold phosphates and sodas, sported big cakes beneath glass covers, boasted stools, malt mixers, spigots seltzer bubbled from like beer. It had piles of packaged pretzels and potato chips, caramel corn and Cracker Jack, molasses cookies and sesame wafers. But every shop, however modest, offered milkballs, butterscotch, niggerbabies, gumdrops, jawbreakers, horehound, hot hearts, jujubes, caramels cut in soft brown cubes, strings of red licorice more tangled than yarn, taffy stale as the salt water it was said to be made with, Life Savers resembling cylinders of small change, silver shot in incipient spills, wafer sandwiches filled with

vanilla, fruit slices and candied dates, root beer barrels, almonds enameled like store-bought teeth, Tootsie Rolls, chunks of chocolate in random hunks like turned-up peat, cookies covered with a crust of white frosting, gingerbread, cupcakes, and fresh fruit pies the size of one's palm, as well as prominently placed boxes of candy bars wrapped in the marks of their trade: Butterfingers, Baby Ruth, Snickers, Oh Henry!, Hershey, Bit o' Honey, Clark, Mars, Milky Way, Powerhouse, Chiclets, and, for a time, Forever Yours (570-71).

This goes on and on and at some point starts to turn into an abstract series of unrelated words that in the process of enumeration lose the concrete reference both to Kohler and the things referred to and signify only the confusing unendingness of the particular and the impossibility of subjecting single entities to perspectivizing vision and to rationalizing and categorizing thought. Since the chain of words/things remains undimensional in perception, since it is more and more unconnected to thought and feeling, the words forfeit their situational coherence. In the context of mere "wordiness", "the edges of distinctions fray", "[c]oncepts are pulled apart", "meaning escapes" in the "[d]e-composition" (25) of subjective or objective links that could establish order and coherence. The paradox lies in the fact that a seeming abundance of concretization turns into unrelatedness and "abstractness". The *loss of the situation* caused by the lack of "reasonable" selection, combination, and context-building ends in the play with words, which indirectly suggests the non-referentiality of language, the unbridgeable tension between word and thing, form and force. This is one way to fantasize the world.

The disruptive potential of the list is radicalized, not only when specific items are lined up in a row but also when a series of parallel situations makes up the list. In the following example they are situations of making love and generating offspring. They blur the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, the organic and the inorganic and extend the possible into the fantastic, keeping, however, the psychological convention — being madly in love — ironically intact. In a parody of love, characterized by a spirit of utter recklessness and playfulness, Barthelme in *The Dead Father* repudiates the literary tradition of representing and evaluating love. In the words of the Dead Father:

I fathered upon her in those nights the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo, the rubber pretzel, the cuckoo clock, the key

chain, the dime bank, the pantograph, the bubble pipe, the punching bag both light and heavy, the inkblot, the nose drop, the midget Bible, the slot-machine slug, and many other useful and humane cultural artifacts, as well as some thousands of children of the ordinary sort. I fathered as well upon her various institutions useful and humane such as the credit union, the dog pound, and parapsychology. I fathered as well various realms and territories all superior in terrain, climatology, laws and customs to this one. I overdid it but I was madly, madly in love, that is all I can say in my own defense. It was a very creative period but my darling, having mothered all this abundance uncomplainingly and without reproach, at last died of it. In my arms of course. Her last words were “enough is enough, Pappy” (DF 49).

The writers’ comments on their use of such lists vary. We may repeat here some of the utterances that we mentioned in another context because they throw a light on the various concepts behind the common strategies. When Larry McCaffery asked Barthelme in an interview about the function of his “lists, which rank with those of William Gass and Stanley Elkin as the best around”, Barthelme answered that “[l]itanies, incantations, have a certain richness per se. They also provide stability in what is often a volatile environment, something to tie to, like an almanac or a telephone book. And discoveries — a list of meter maids in any given city will give you a Glory Hercules” (LeClair and McCaffery 43). Gass comments on his lists too, but in a different manner: “When I am playing with forms, it is often simply to find a form for something odd like the garbage. I love lists. They begin with no form at all ... often, anyway. A list of names is very challenging. There is one right order and the problem is to find it” (LeClair and McCaffery 166). One might add that these lists not only develop into an order but, conversely, also into a *force* of their own that disrupts “regular” (spatial and situational) order. Barth speaks of “the absolute chaos and anarchy of indiscrimination that threatens the novel, that threatens all lists, catalogs, anatomies and the rest” (Ziegler and Bigsby 37). It is thus the struggle between disorder/force and order/form that comes to a climax in the mere listings of items. Or, to quote from Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*: “The separate multiple consciousnesses of the [...] things in these Flemish primitives, that is really *the force and flaw* in these paintings” (490). In a way, the list is an illustration of what Dilthey called the hermeneutic circle: the problematics of the relationship between the particular and the general, the impossibility *and* the necessity to abstract from the specific the nonspecific, the conceptual. The

problem is now radicalized by the language-reality dichotomy. The use of the list is part of “the aesthetics of disappearance”. It abolishes concrete placement in space for fear of limiting the range of the imagination by the experience of familiar stability. The imagination then playfully fills the remaining gap in its own terms, in the extreme case by mere lists. Barth says of his long novels that “their mere persistence” is “an exorcism of nothingness, of the vacuum that one fears might exist if one stops to look at the void” (Ziegler and Bigsby 36).

### 6.3.6. Liberation: Movement, Closure, and Aimlessness

*Movement* and the *absence of movement* are important indications of what the text is about. Movement tends towards openness and defines itself against closure. Now the paradoxical case is feasible: that movement results in closure by the endlessness of repetition without aim and result. Kafka, Borges, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet fill their fictions with dreaming, obsession, hallucination, and nightmare. Their texts are pervaded with claustrophobic, prison-like or labyrinthine but indistinct, indefinable places. The protagonists either are confined in such prison-like places or wander through them in movements without end, which is more or less the same thing. Two important aspects characterize movement: *way* and *goal*. When only one of them is available, movement loses its end-directed dynamics and becomes stagnant, mere repetition, either a wandering around in a constant deferral of purpose and aim or only hope/vision/intention for the future without means to realize them. Kafka writes in his diary: “All is imaginary [...] the truth that lies closest, however, is only this: that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell” (qtd. in Heller 108). He speaks about truth and the truth-seeking human being in terms of the goal and the way to reach the goal: “There is a goal, but no way; what we call the way is only wavering” (qtd. in Heller 108). The land-surveyor in *The Castle* has a goal: to be accepted and settle his affairs in the castle. But in spite of ever-new beginnings, his nightmare-like efforts are constantly frustrated by the impenetrability of offices and officers at the castle — the result being that he wanders in the impenetrable labyrinth of paths in utter pain and despair, becoming ever-more weary and wasted in his efforts. Unlike

postmodern authors, Kafka does not yet appear to see the unfathomability of the labyrinthine structure of space and of the mind under the modality of the possible as a chance at creativity for the mind. If he indeed does see it in this way, he then considers it a burden, a burden that must be borne. Kafka's imperial messenger is imprisoned in movement that will never reach a goal, the way extending into infinity. He "is still forcing his way through chambers of the innermost palace". However, "he will never get to the end of them; and even if he did, he would be no better off". Staircases would be replaced by courtyards, the outer palace would turn into the inner palace, new staircases, courtyards and palaces would follow, "and so on for thousands of years" (*Met* 159). Kafka's space is not freedom but infinite imprisonment.

This changes decisively in postmodern fiction. Borges sets the trends. As mentioned, in his fictions the labyrinth is the structural paradigm that covers all movement; for him the labyrinth is "the most obvious symbol of feeling puzzled and baffled" (67). He turns space, time, characters, actions, or, to use his representative examples, books, libraries, deserts, cities, palaces and lotteries, into labyrinths; and he revels, in contrast to Kafka, in confounding reversals and framings inside and outside the text. Borges figures labyrinths within the text and the text itself as labyrinth. The labyrinth is indeed the image/metaphor of the myriad of possibilities that are offered at every point of the forked path, which is an "incomplete, but not false image of the universe" (*Lab* 28). In the labyrinth, sequentiality is complemented with or even replaced by the simultaneity of possibilities; possibility becomes actuality and vice versa; force relativizes form, form absorbs the dissolution of form. In the "ideal" fiction, form and force are balanced; all possibilities are chosen at once (as in the ideal novel of *The Tralfamadorians* in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*.) One must note that, as Ts'ui Pên in "The Garden of Forking Paths" maintains, "[i]n all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên he chooses — simultaneously — all of them" (*Lab* 26). His world is a simultaneity of places, as it is also a simultaneity of times, and the figuration of infinite designs.

The postmodern position becomes clear in a comparison with Kerouac's *On the Road*. This novel is a road novel and demonstrates

how movement along the road, the traditional escape-route from stasis and sameness in the American novel (cf. *Huckleberry Finn*), reaches its limit because it has no finalities. In Kerouac's book, characters move on the road because "the last thing is what you can't get [...] Nobody can get to the last thing" (OR 48). Unlimited movement on "an anywhere road for anybody" (237), "all the way down the line" (59), with cities "breaking up in the air and dissolving to [...] sight" (262), is the second-best thing if you can't get the last thing. The "adventures in the crazy American night" (96), with the "unforeseen event lurking to surprise you" (128), the change of place, time, perspective, and identity, in short, the experience of indeterminacy, make for a beat life without teleology. Sal Paradise says: "I had a book with me [...], but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise and stretch in it mystified my longing" (99), as also did "the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side" (115). In contrast to this program of freedom by the road, postmodern texts no longer allow fear of sameness and bureaucratic order to be compensated for by spatial mobility, which is now satirized. In Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* the following polylogue occurs:

What *is* the American fetish about highways?  
 They want to get somewhere, LaBas offers.  
 Because something is after them, Black Herman adds.  
 But what is after them? They are after themselves. They call it  
 destiny. Progress. We call it Haints. Haints of their victims rising from the  
 soil of Africa, South America, Asia (154).

Postmodern narratives contain a lot of movement but, following in the paths of Kafka, Borges, and Robbe-Grillet, do not give attention to the spatial aspects of mobility, speed, the road, the sequence of separate places, their appearance and disappearance in the flight of motion, the bodily feeling of joy and exhilaration, or, quite generally, the sensory perception and separation of things for observation and emotional attunement: they do not indicate the form movement takes. Movement is what we have called "abstract". What in Barth's "Night-Sea Journey" the narrator/protagonist notes, can be generalized: "The 'purpose' of the night-sea journey — but not necessarily of the journeyer or of either Maker! — my friend could describe only in abstractions: *consummation, transfiguration, union of contraries, transcension of categories*" (LF 10). Federman,



partly metaphorizing the journey, says: “My stories are usually based on a journey of some sort. This doesn’t have to be a physical, geographical journey from one place to another — I say ‘journey’ simply in terms of movement. And whenever there is movement in a story, then there is also displacement, discovery, loss, and mystery” (LeClair and McCaffery 129). Space, things, and movement, unspecified by details, adopt a function of their own as *mobility* and *vacuity*, as force. Sukenick writes, “though there is not necessarily plot or story in a narrative, there is always a field of action, and in a field of action the way energy moves should be the most obvious element”. The field of action is marked by space and time. For Sukenick the novel is “the most fluid and changing of literary forms, space plus time equals movement: things in process of happening” (1985, 12-13, 141, 9). In his *Out*, movement in space offers the opportunity to concretize as force the abstract narrative principles of composition and decomposition, integration and displacement, by the interchange of meetings and departures.

The separability of goal and way in movement makes it possible to distinguish between mobility and immobility *within* movement: mobility as purposeful, goal-directed motion, immobility as mere, circling repetition. Postmodern fiction exploits this contrast. Mobility vs. immobility is one of its central figurations and relates to the absence-presence paradigm. Mobility, for instance, makes Pynchon’s *V.* a “fluid” book, but it ends in immobility. Stencil, the protagonist of the book, attempts to make up for the feeling of emptiness by the force of movement, but the quest fails to take the form of directedness towards an end and a fixable goal; Lady V., the goal of the quest, dissolves into a multiplicity of designations or even into mere fiction, and finally into a mere collection of inanimate parts of machinery. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, all the movements are goal-directed, the goal being the rocket as, ultimately, a pure source of force. As such, it is beyond the grasp of human beings, since it avoids the form of fixities and definites, multiplies its meaning, is the symbol of openness that implodes closure, all of which renders its goal-status vague, multiple, and indeterminate. This indeterminacy also devalues the endeavors invested in the way to the goal, the rocket, which is finally no goal but the sum of possibilities. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa’s active questing after the Tristero underground system of communication is again a rejection of social

form and a questing after the force of renewal, but this too ends in a passive drifting through the mysteries of places, streets, directions, while the goal in its vagueness remains beyond grasp.

But movement is not only aligned with the modernist formula of the quest. Movement is tested for its value, for what it is worth as action. In Gaddis's *JR*, mobility and immobility are the two sides of doing business, and doing business in this telephone novel can be divided into the activity of the business people and the movement of things. The activity of doing business is stagnant; it is reduced to fantastic telephone activities. The telephone schemes of speculation and manipulation are topped by the fantasized operations of the protagonist, JR, who, as an eleven-year old boy, deceives the whole business world of New York about his age and status, and simply by telephone builds up an international concern. While mobility is mere "just doing", circling, it is immobility in every other sense. Mobility is reserved for inanimate things; the flow of stocks at Wall Street investment firms and of consumer goods at a school and an apartment, accelerates beyond control. Just as mobility reifies to stasis, overstuffing with things turns into vacuity of purpose and meaning. What happens is empty, stultifying routine, formless form. It defines the deteriorating condition of society, or rather, its fantastic condition of immobility in mobility, which points to a loss of the force of renewal, to entropy.

Psychological, social, and universal perspectives combine in quite another business novel, Elkin's *The Franchiser*, which individualizes the problem of doing business, using as a basis the mobility vs. immobility paradigm. Movement on the road is not in *The Franchiser* the sign of individual freedom from social bondage, as in the modernist novel (cf. the end of Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Bellow's *Augie March*). On the contrary, it is the affirmation of sameness, of social normalcy; it is the source and the result of healthy business activities, of the projection into the exterior world of a pattern of mastery, mastery attained by the interchangeability of identical franchises across the landscape. For Ben Flesh, the protagonist of *The Franchiser*, who lives from his "grand rounds" all over America, from his own circuit of repetitive visits, reality fuses with fiction. Franchising is a kind of costuming for a Broadway show; Ben feels "like a producer with several shows running on Broadway at the same time. My businesses

take me from place to place. My home is these United States” (34). His business and his “need” while traveling across the United States is to create with space and travel what Dick Gibson in *The Dick Gibson Show* does with time and the radio: namely, to spread American ordinariness all over the landscape, “to continue his country, to give it its visual props, its mansard roofs and golden arches and false belfries, all its ubiquitous, familiar neon signatures and logos, all the *things*, all its *crap*, the true American graffiti, that perfect queer calligraphy of American signature, what gave it its meaning and made it fun” (270). The “meaning” of expansive existence has here been turned inside out, providing a perfect contrast to the movements in Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Satisfactions do not evolve from the excitements of surprise, the changes of identity, the expansiveness of life, the experience of its continuous difference and force, as in *On the Road*, but from the transformation of difference into sameness. In fact immobility is the aim of mobility. The country is standardized and fictionalized, so that everyone can move along without fear of the “real”, of the strange, and so that one is nowhere alone in one’s travels, always meets the familiar, the same Kentucky Fried Chickens or Howard Johnsons, the solidarity of other Americans, the identical affirmative motto: “Take It Easy”. One actually moves from nowhere to nowhere. Both goal and way are devalued.

Throughout his travels Ben Flesh remains amorphous. Movement and travel are only franchised movements and travels, a mere circling; they have given him only a collective identity, a borrowed life modeled according to clichés, free from passions, complexity, and uncertainty. He “dolefully confesses” that “some people, me, for example, are born without goals. There are a handful of us without obsession [...] I live without obsession, without drive, a personal insanity even, why, that’s terrible. The loneliest thing imaginable. Yet I’ve had to live that way, live this, this — sane life, deprived of all the warrants of personality. To team up with the available. Living this franchised life under the logo of others!” (282) But in the ecstatic vision before his death, he re-identifies with what has been his life. This recourse to his own self is possible because, like Dick Gibson, he lived for an American ideal, the communal spirit, even if the way he wanted to promote it was false in its negation of difference and complexity. The book gains its ironic

angle and its complexity by splitting up truth into an “objective” negative and a subjective, positive perspective.

In Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, social, psychological, and aesthetic considerations combine in quite a different way. Yet they rest once more on the juxtaposition of mobility and immobility, as they do so often in American novels. Billy’s various stages of life interchange mysteriously, uncontrollably. This is true of his experiences as prisoner of war in Dresden during the firebombing in World War II, his involvement with the world of the inhabitants of the planet Tralfamadore during the time he was kidnapped, and his current, ordinary existence as a middle-aged optometrist. These phases of his existence interact, fuse, and lead to an obsessive habit of “time travel”, movements in time and place that make the absent present and the present absent, without a concrete motif or goal. All mobility becomes resigned, goalless, and immobile by the repetition (about a hundred times) of the “staticizing” phrase: “So it goes”. It overforms the psychological problem of traumatic, uncontrolled force with a formative, both generalizing and comicalizing, aesthetic perspective. Time travel is in part motivated by the traumatic experience in Dresden during the firebombing, but it is also abstracted from a merely psychological view. Though time travel has a beginning and an end, ending in Bill’s violent death, it has no simple origin and goal. It cancels the rigid, regulating forms of bourgeois existence, but it is not regenerative, remaining in a state of both vacuity and confinement.

What we recognize in all these novels is that a character is not the leading factor of the narrative, nor is a theme like identity and wholeness, but instead, anthropologically basic, though abstract, paradigms. The characters serve as point of transfer for basic contrasting constellations that also gain symbolic function: mobility vs. immobility, openness vs. closure, difference vs. sameness, the inanimate vs. the animate, or simply doing vs. what is worth doing, simplicity vs. complexity. We will return to these decisive problems in the analysis of character in postmodern fiction.

### 6.3.7. Spatial Symbolism

At this point we will follow up our discussion of the role of the symbol in postmodern fiction that we began in the second chapter because the symbolic figuration in these texts is indicative of the concepts, strategies, and difficulties of meaning-building in these texts and extends the insight into the problems raised by symbolic forms in postmodern fiction. As has been mentioned, postmodern fiction is in many ways both a continuation and a disruption of the strategies of modernist narrative. It is a continuation because both the modernists and the postmodernists believe in the necessity of form. There is a difference between the modern and the postmodern symbolic methods in that the latter is multiperspectual, does not produce meaning as wholeness, but can only “possibilize” meaning, which includes non-meaning and needs to incorporate chaos and entropy, while the ingredient of chaos in modern fiction is only superficially integrated in the totality of form. Furthermore, in postmodern texts symbols of incongruity, of deformation, are not perspectivized in a single negative way (like the symbols of the grotesque, for instance, in Conrad, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, or Nathanael West), but in a multi-judgmental way. This strategy superimposes, for instance, the satiric and the grotesque modes of evaluation and mutes their critical acumen by play, irony, and the comic mode. Two statements may serve as an introduction. In Gass’s *The Tunnel*, Kohler notes in his typically paradoxical style: “What I had discovered [sifting through Auntie’s boxes in the attic] was that every space contains more space than the space it contains”. Though the remark refers to the piles of boxes within boxes, so that “out of one box a million million more might multiply, confirming Zeno’s view” (600), it suggests not only the infinite number of boxes, but also, with the multiplication of vehicles, the endless multiplication of tenors, of meanings, and of possible suggestions locked in objects; indeed “history deposits itself inside its surroundings — in objects” (314), so that the “mutual influence of simultaneous presences [shows] in the same space” and reveals “the complex interconnections of life with Life” (425). Complementary to Gass’s statement is Kenneth Burke’s reference to reader-response quoted above: “One cannot long discuss imagery, without sliding into symbolism [...] We shift from the image of an object to its

symbolism as soon as we consider it, not in itself alone, but as a function, a texture of relationships” (165).

We have seen in an earlier chapter that postmodern narrative problematizes the meaning-building “crossovers” (Elkin) that are the basis of modernist symbolic fiction. Robbe-Grillet, for instance, even rejects symbolic figurations, and Barthes, writing about Robbe-Grillet’s narrative method, says: “[t]he object is no longer a center of correspondences, a welter of sensations and symbols; it is merely an optical resistance. [...] here the object does not exist beyond its phenomenon” (1972, 14-15). This of course is only true in relative terms, because, as Burke notes in the quote above, “[w]e shift from the image of an object to its symbolism as soon as we consider it”. In spite of certain reservations with regard to the modernist symbolist fashion, the postmodern writers often make use of symbolism in practice, not as totalizing form but as a *partializing* and sometimes deconstructing form, using characters, but especially places and things, for the purpose of signification. Borges says that the (decentered) labyrinth is “the decisive most obvious symbol of feeling puzzled and baffled” (317). Elkin remarks: “I’m conscious of symbols and patterns in my work” (LeClair and McCaffery 108). Though Gass’s Kohler speaks in *The Tunnel* of signs of wear in the symbolic method, indeed, says that “the centers of our symbols wear like stairs” (*Tun* 25). Gass himself holds a more complex view. He says in an interview: “I keep fussing around, trying to find ways to symbolize what I want” (LeClair and McCaffery 162); in his story “Mrs. Mean”, the maxim “signs without are only symbols of the world within” (*HHC* 133) leads the narrator “to mark her [Mrs. Mean’s] and her doings in my head” in a way that “is far too abstract” (*HHC* 106). Barthelme ridicules and parodies the modernist symbolizing method. He addresses the reader with the questions “Have you understood up to now that Moinos dead or alive is only a symbolic figure?” and “Is it clear that the journey is a metaphor for something else?” (*ToL*). However, as the statements of almost all postmodern writers demonstrate, the text needs a form, both for the “spatial” representation of the simultaneity of positions and perspectives, and for the indication of the irrational and the ineffable. Thus Barthelme confirms the symbolist method *ex negativo*.

What evolves from the remarks of the postmodern writers is a double notion: symbols are needed but they have to be transformed.

The vehicle and tenor of the symbol must be reconstructed or newly fashioned, mostly without the fixed center of significance, which is replaced with a tenor full of manifold suggestiveness. As Roland Barthes writes, “the plural of a text” is kept intact when “everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure” (1974, 11-12). What is created in all these cases is a constructionist, “metaphorical” symbol that holds together vehicle and tenor in an artificial manner, full of tension, often with incompatible terms, in the sense defined above. It stands in contrast to the “natural” symbol, the synecdochal symbol, where part stands for the whole, or the metonymic symbol, characterized by contiguity resting on human systems of differentiation (dryness-wetness). The postmodern writers may be skeptical of “meaning” in any traditional sense, but the more complex their narratives become, the less they can do without a symbolizing spatial master grid or a central thing or image. They need it as a concrete matrix towards which to direct their play with relations and disruptions, attitudes, and evaluations, in the process of continuously inventing and revising meaning.

Apart from the synecdochal, metonymic, or metaphorical structuring of the symbol, the relationship between the vehicle and semantic tenor can be *causal*, *analogical*<sup>99</sup> or *arbitrary* and contingent in the way it signifies, analogical here used in a simplifying way for both substantial similarity and similarity of structure. Causal links generally belong to the synecdoche, which sets the part for the whole; analogical links set the outer and the inner in a relationship of parallelism and thus elucidate the emotional and the spiritual through the sensual. Analogical bonds refer more to the self, its inner situation and its relation to other people and to the world, and thus become symbols of self-understanding, while the causal symbol becomes a milieu-symbol that makes known a segment of ideas and forces that define and press on the character(s) and determine its (their) lifeworld. All three — causal, analogical, and arbitrary links — stand for the refusal to accept the incomprehensible, but, while the causal and analogical structures express the need to avoid contradiction and confusion and establish (rational) frames of reference, the arbitrary tenor simply serves the need for creative, imaginary control, without claims to truth, or at least not to a rationalizable single truth. If analogy — and less so

causality — seemingly take stock of and list that which is *ungraspable*, they still categorize the latter as the ineffable and thus establish the (comforting or disturbing, even terrifying, but meaningful) dualism of the known and the unknown. The postmodern, aestheticized, arbitrary symbol foregoes that consolation or constraint, depending on the viewpoint. With its imposed tenor, it does not rely simply on analogical or causal links, but also fosters the complication and ironization of the relation between vehicle and tenor, emphasizing its incongruity. The purpose of this strategy is to stimulate the imagination, which takes stock of the potential of possibilities of meaning by superimposing one structure on another, without much thought given to the pressing concerns of “reality”.

In transitory texts of violence, the symbol is still reminiscent of the modernist thematic symbol, for instance, the symbol of the grotesque, though it already bears more constructionist traits. In Jerzy Kosinski's brutal war novel, *The Painted Bird*, the title-image of the painted bird (rejected and killed by the other birds for being different) gains the status of a central symbol for the actions of perversion, torture, and killing that dominate the individual episodes. In Heller's *Catch 22*, “the soldier in white”, who “was constructed entirely of gauze, plaster and thermometer” is already a symbol with a widening tenor. It is a symbol of violence and the grotesque. It suggests the danger to life and individuality everywhere in this world, even in the hospital. In his inability to act and think, the soldier in white stands for everything that is hollow on the inside, for the hollowed-out and reified human being, for the “nauseating truth” (*C22* 172) that “[t]here's no one inside” (374) in the gauze and plaster, and, one would have to add, that there is no meaning in society, nor in action and reflection, and no coordination of them.

By widening the tenor of the symbol in postmodern fiction, the symbol is no longer a form of wholeness and “essence”, but of the *simultaneity* of perspectives. The meaning-giving process is twofold in a paradoxical way. Significance is freely imposed on the material, but the material vehicle is also searched for and deciphered for its own meaning, and for the *possibilities* of meaning. Gass says, “when it comes to the fashioning of my own work now, I am aiming at a Rilkean kind of celebrational object, thing, *Dinge*”. “I am exposing a symbolic center. When I think the exposure is complete, I am finished with the story. [...] The title [...] is a direct statement of



the central image” (LeClair and McCaffery 154, 168). Federman, freely exchanging the terms metaphor and symbol, notes: “I still have to find the image, the metaphor which will sustain the novel. That too is crucial to my writing, or to much of so-called postmodern fiction: it relies strongly on a central metaphor. [...] My role, once I have set up the metaphor, is to decipher the meaning of that metaphor and write its symbolic meaning. That will be the novel”. Then he gives a concrete example: “Obviously the central image in *The Voice in the Closet* [...] comes from a real, a very visual image or snapshot — the image of the boy in that closet crouching to take a shit on a newspaper” (LeClair and McCaffery 129-30). In fact, “*The Voice in the Closet* is the deciphering of that picture and its symbolic implications. Obviously the closet becomes a womb and a tomb — the beginning of my life, but also its end — metaphorically speaking” (LeClair and McCaffery 144). (When the Nazis came to get his parents and his sisters, his mother pushed him into a closet, where he stayed for 24 hours. Thus his life was saved, while his whole family was killed in Auschwitz.)

The long postmodern novels especially demonstrate that Federman is right about the “crucial role” of a central (spatial) symbol for the construction of the narrative. We will here concentrate on such central symbolic figurations. Examples include Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, Gass’s *The Tunnel*, and Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*, in which the Rocket, the “West Line”, the Tunnel, and the Giant Computer respectively serve this purpose; we will add Hawkes’s *Blood Oranges* that uses a “sex tableau” on the beach as a symbol of the symmetry of sex and erotics, erotics and aesthetics, and aesthetics and nature, and Barthelme’s stories “The Balloon” and “The Glass Mountain”, which problematize the central ephemeral symbols named in the title, together with the whole symbolizing process. Both the long and short narratives use the spatial object to inscribe in it the idea that “[e]verything is both simultaneous and continuous and intermittent and mixed” (*Tun* 31). In two cases, the “West Line” and the Tunnel, the spatial symbols are primordial images that inscribe the human will into the shape of the earth; in the other two cases, the Rocket and the Computer, they are images of machines that mark the self-confident and self-dependent ingenuity of the human mind, its innovative (deconstructive and reconstructive) force that aims at

surpassing and dominating the force of nature. In all four instances the spatial symbols signify the attempt to overcome boundaries and extend limits; their vehicles are chosen for their all-encompassing connotations and suggestiveness that open up the concrete design to a wide-ranging but at the same time ambivalent, even diffused meaning. Their tenors organize this meaning in terms of multi-valence, possibility, and uncertainty. Reaching out in the process of signifying to the greatest amount of possibility and ambivalence, the texts appear to aim at “viewing things whole” (*MD* 411), but in a new kind of wholeness, the attempt at inclusiveness or at an extreme multiplicity of perspectives. Their plurality, mere possibility, and contradictoriness explode the possibility of multiplicity in oneness. What characterizes all these symbolic inventions is the tension between the clearly circumscribed vehicle and the diffuse, multiplying tenor, the reason being that, again paradoxically, or perhaps logically, the postmodern novel tends in its negation of meaning towards the highest degree of universal meaning-testing. In the following section, short analyses of *Mason & Dixon*, *The Tunnel*, and *Giles Goat-Boy* may demonstrate this tendency that adopts but in fact radicalizes and explodes the modernist thematic symbol of the kind that Virginia Woolf uses in *To the Lighthouse* (see also the examination of the structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow* at the end of the book).<sup>100</sup>

### 6.3.7.1. William Gass, *The Tunnel*

The tunnel is for Professor Kohler the “escape route of my own contriving” (498), escape from “disappointments”, “resentments”, “letdowns”, and “failures”, from “betrayal, guilt”, “jealousy”, and “humiliation” (54), from the feeling of “loss, grief, loneliness”, from the weight of “tons of trivia and tedium” (29). Having finished a book on *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany* and laboring on “its impossible introduction” (155) that he cannot finish because he is fascinated with endings rather than beginnings, he realizes that his book’s “soberly documented form”, “its powerful logic”, “its lofty hierarchy of explanations”, the “tables of statistics”, and the “disciplined academic style” are not adequate to what he writes about: history. The question is: “how much life is simply consecutive?” Kohler’s idea of release and re-orientation (“my

subject's far too serious for scholarship" 107) concentrates on his "search for a symbol, some sense for my silly situation" (123), in fact the force to open the "soberly documented form". He finds this force not in the house, for "[i]n this house I am afraid of everything" (17), but rather in the hole in the earth below the house, the tunnel, which he digs himself and which for him becomes an adequate signifier for an alternative, forceful life and writing: "Today I began to dig; took my first bite of the earth; put in my first pick. Astonishing. That I have actually begun. Hard to believe. A beginning. With that first blow — what elation I felt! Feel. I *am* light. I float although there is no wind. I swoop low to gather altitude the way the roller coaster does, and there I see the thick world differently. Engineless and silent, I float under everything as easily as an image in the water. At last — at long last — I've felt fistfuls in my fists. [...] I shall split the earth asunder" (146-47). The cellar becomes a "wrathcellar", a place of elemental force. Kohler believes that

there must be an underworld under this world, a concealment of history beneath my exposition of it, a gesture which will symbolize my desperation. O my father! country! house of Kohler! hole up here! cling to the furnace end of this hollow rope, relinquish the air for the earth. A plague on the front door may one day read: Herein lies a pointless passage put down by a Pretender to the Throne of Darkness. Let God uproot this pathway if He likes, we shall still stare at the hole the hole has left, and wonder at the works of Man, and marvel at the little bit that mostly *Is*, and at the awkward lot that mostly *Aint* (153).

Looking "for a reason why I'm here which will not be the reason why I'm here" (148), Kohler (supposedly unknown to his estranged wife) appears to dig a hole, a tunnel, in the cellar, in unison with the hole and tunnel that will mark his new text about Germany. Both merge. The hole in the cellar "will celebrate defeat, not victory" (154); the tunnel that is "my quarrel with the earth" (182) is a "hole as hid as my hidden text [...] the private inventions on these pages from their tunnel into Time [...] runaway tunnel into HYPERBOLIX ESCAPE SPACE" (498). The tunnel is Kohler's "highest heaven of invention", combining the material and the spiritual, the concrete and the abstract: "I do curl by curl carve my way through the closeness of this clay, I do chip by chip chunk it out" (501). It is his way of creating a spatial (earth) symbol for the simultaneity of force and form, of being set free of the inexorable succession of time, for the

hidden, the unknown, and the ineffable that rest in the earth and that can only be opened up by the imagination. Thus the digging of the tunnel and the inventing activity of the imagination merge. Kohler wonders whether “the underground” can

tell us what goes on in that inner realm, however it happens, whether it’s as we think, ever so slowly, and life sleeps upside down there like bats, or whether, at the genetic center of the self, in pure birth earth, there is no need for any action and all is over and nothing’s begun: because we’re in that fabled place where compacts of conclusion coalesce like veins of coal, compressed past the thought of further futures and consequently beyond each form of the past, to be free of time like the proverbial bird, fixed — frozen sufficiently for it, fired, glazed — that’s what we really don’t know and maybe motivates my burrowing — if there’s a bottom nature, and just what’s what where the well ends, when we pass beneath its water, when we actually enter ‘in’ and find ourselves in front of *n* and of the other side of *i* (501).

In spite of “the tedium of my task” and the “lack of loving companionship”, “I know how hallowed the hidden is, how necessary it is for us to occupy a world of our own contriving”, which is accomplished in “off-the-cuff planning and makeshift shafts”; indeed, “making do, cobbling, skimming, fudging, somehow getting on, is nearly the whole idea”. The hidden is the symbol of “my own imaginary world [that] has been under construction for a lifetime” (502). This imaginary world reinterprets the world “in dream terms, revising Martha, my work, this house, class time, my moments of self-abuse, as situations, scenes, and players, because I lived in a double context” (503), namely in “reality” and the world of dreaming, of the imagination, facing the fact that “ordinary life is supported by lies, made endurable through self-deception”; yet — “in my illusion no illusions are allowed” (503). In fact, I “have, as the sillies sort of say, turned in, turned out, dropped off, gone quite away into the peaceful silence of my page, the slow cold work of my cellar” (411). Yet every thesis, Beckett-like, calls for its counter-thesis; something is nothing and vice versa: “With my tunnel I have committed the ultimate inactive act. After all, what is a useless hole? I can honestly say I have accomplished Nothing” (468) — except that “[e]very day I draw something down in the dirt” (506), which explains the prevalence in the book of words like “shit”, “penis/cock”, “fuck”, or “cunt”, the abundance of which tries the reader’s patience.

This brings us to the ultimate aspect of the tunnel: the blending of tunnel and book. The tunnel becomes a symbol for the creative process and again a symbol for the final product. In an interview of 1976, Gass commented on the plan of the book, parts of which have appeared in print since 1969; though the book was published in its entirety only in 1995, this delay was more or less according to plan. It is helpful to quote the whole passage from the interview because it demonstrates the formal energy that went into the book, the comprehensiveness of the design that delayed its completion, and perhaps the inevitable failure of the book to attain a multiplicity in unity, which the tunnel as symbol stands for and finally fails to represent:

The book is a tunnel; the writing of the book is the digging of the tunnel. So it has to have characteristics of tunnels which somebody might be digging, out of a prison or concentration camp, say. Don't you feel surrounded by camp guards? [...] My character starts to dig a tunnel in his own basement. Maybe he is not digging a tunnel, maybe he is just talking about it, wishing it very hard, dreaming it, imagining very vividly. They'll all do. I've got to have it every way. But he is digging a tunnel in his own basement, so he has to hide the dirt. If the book is itself a verbal tunnel, then it is the depository: he dumps the language of the day in this place. So instead of being a book in the ordinary sense, it is a dump ground, a place, a location. The text is both a path through time and a pile of debris [...] A tunnel is a hole surrounded by earth. This tunnel is going to be a hole surrounded by the words that the narrator puts there. There are two ways of making a tunnel: one is to hollow out a hole and take everything away, and the other is to use earth to mold a tube. A tunnel is an escape route, a way of crossing over things by going under. In my narrator's so-called referential life he is taking dirt out, but in terms of the construction of the book he is bringing it in and molding it. He is building two kinds of tunnel, then, one from the outside and one from the inside. In the verbal tunnel the reader is on the inside. My problem is again to find the symbols that will give the reader the analogy for the shape of the book (LeClair and McCaffery 170-71).

What Gass seeks is a totalizing symbol or a string of symbols that signify order and chaos at the same time. This problem is obviously unsolvable, and it remains unsolved in the final version of the book. The case of *The Tunnel* is a model case of the attempt to transform the modernist, meaning-giving, thematic symbol into what Barth calls the emblem of storytelling that contains all aspects of the text,

in Gass's terms, "a set of very open possibilities", while rejecting any "rigid design" (LeClair and McCaffery 171).

To complete the picture, we might add a few remarks about some of Gass's shorter texts. From the beginning, Gass creates characters who find in symbols truth or ersatz satisfaction for the failure to relate meaningfully to the world. He always uses the metaphoric, the constructionist symbol, for instance in the two stories "The Icicles" and "The Order of Insects" from *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories*, where the symbolizing process, as it were, carries on and transforms the modern symbol of *existential* illumination into one of existential confusion. The symbolic vehicles in these stories, icicles and insects, would under "normal" circumstances appear pathetically unsuited to their tenors, beauty, and universal order. The tension between vehicle and tenor points to an estranged consciousness, a sense of personal frustration and obsession, the wish to evade the world of deprivation, but also to the state of the world itself, the unsatisfactory exclusiveness of human, clichéd, dualistic categories of thought, in contrast to the manifoldness of possible perspectives on the world. The female protagonist in "Order of Insects" *imposes* the *form* of wholeness on the symbolic vehicle of death and ugliness, by reversing the familiar negative associations these creatures raise, thus imposing a feeling and an idea on the uninviting lower strata of nature. In this process the tenor is widely diffused, in fact goes out of control. The attempt at control by creating meaning goes to the point of *losing* or giving up control to the *force* of the uncontrollable relation between outside and inside. The female narrator of "Order of Insects" perceives in the ugly insects "gracious order, wholeness, and divinity" (HHC 188); she is finally overwhelmed by what she perceives and imagines: "I no longer own my own imagination [...] and then the drama of their [the bugs'] passage would take hold of me [...] I felt, while I lay shell-like in our bed, turned inside out, driving my mind away, it was the same as the dark soul of the world itself — and it was this beautiful and terrifying feeling that took possession of me finally, stiffened me like a rod beside my husband, played caesar to my dreams" (HHC 186). The symbol from nature, as it were, is "doubly" aestheticized. The aesthetic figuration superimposes one kind of aesthetic symbolic structure on the other. "The metaphorical" (aesthetic-constructionist) structure of wholeness and order arrived at

in moments of revelation willfully changes and expands the normal synecdochal one that would, in viewing the repulsive bugs, signify ugliness. Though the symbol is a means of adapting the world to the experiencing subject, what happens here is the reverse case; it is the adapting of the subject to the world, to the uncontrollable and ineffable, as is also the case in *The Tunnel*.

If in Gass the symbolic method focuses not on space but directly on a character, it is just like the spatial symbol: no longer a substance in its own right but a kind of mirror, here a mirror for other people who make of it a metaphorical, constructionist symbol. In *Omensetter's Luck*, according to Gass, Omensetter's "unreflective, prelapsarian presence" is a quasi-undefined material to be used by other people for the needs and purposes of their own symbolic disposition, and this presence "assumes fearful symbolic dimensions". He "strikes various people in town as a sort of reflector, precisely receptive to symbolizing because he appears not to do so. So each character in the novel is busy turning Omensetter into a kind of material for the symbols they wish to make" (Ziegler and Bigsby 153-54). The relation between vehicle and tenor here turns arbitrary and contingent. Indeed, "this unreflective, natural, threatening character is a symbol for the concrete moment when all reflection breaks down, when those who reflect on different levels of consciousness can no longer communicate. Does Omensetter represent the opacity of the relation between reality and the imagination?" (Ziegler and Bigsby 153). We will come back to *Omensetter's Luck* later.

### 6.3.7.2. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*

In Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon*, the symbolic matrix is the *Westline* that the two "Astronomers Royal" named in the title, establish as "the Boundaries between the American Provinces of Pennsylvania and Maryland, [...] using the most modern means available, in marking these out, — one of them being a Parallel of Latitude, five degrees, an Hundred Leagues of Wilderness, East to West" (182). They take "Latitudes and Longitudes, by the Stars" (201), and mark "a Meridian line, then clear a Visto, then measure straight up the middle of it" (694). This Line is not only the geographical grid and the historical anchor of the crucial part of the

book, it also points to the future as the “object of hope that Miracles might yet occur, that God might yet return to Human Affairs” (353); this line is, in fact, the vehicle of all the different, contradictory interpretations of the American way of moving Westward and its universal significance, of the antagonism between civilization and wilderness, the known and the unknown, dogmatic linearity and magic circularity, “Modern Science” and “Ancient Savagery” (650), in short, between form and force. Indeed, “[t]he Path of this Line” (459), as “it speeds its way like a Coach upon the Coaching-Road of Desire, where we create continually before us the Road we must journey upon” (459), is both defensive and aggressive, a symbol of the progress of civilization and its invasion into regions that belong to others, to the Indians and to nature. The Line is the way “on Westward, wherever ’tis not yet mapp’d, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen”. It “makes itself felt, — thro’ some Energy unknown” (650). It is “a journey onward, [...] — an Act of Earth, irrevocable as taking Flight” (531). Driving West, the surveyors “trespass, each day ever more deeply, into a world of less restraint in ev’rything, — no law, no convergence upon any idea of how life is to be”, towards “some concentration of Fate, — some final condition of Abandonment” (608-09). The Line is “some Energy unknown”, but also the form of order and law, and of violence on nature and people: “Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People” (615).

Again the paradox reigns, and the symbol functions as vehicle and as receptor of simultaneity and possibility. The “inscription upon the Earth of these enormously long straight Lines” (547) forges the “Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments, — winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair” (345). The Line is home and produces despair. Being radically ambiguous in its purpose and effect, it acts against the “Prairie of desperate Immensity” (361), but is “also fear’d and resented” (440); it is “link’d to the stars, to that inhuman Precision” (440), yet is also mere routine and “a conduit of Evil” (701). Pushing the Line West gives the Surveyors “fugitive moment[s] of Peace” (476): the sense that



they have “pass’d permanently into Dream” (477), that they “traverse an Eden, unbearably fair in the Dawn” (476), but it raises also doubts, the “darker Sentiments” (479) about their mission, indeed, “the great Ghost of the woods has been whispering to them, — tho’ Reason suggests the Wind, — ‘No ... no more ... no further’” (634). Dixon says: “We shouldn’t be runnin’ this Line?” (478), the line “with its star-dictated indifference to the true inner shape, or a Dragon, of the Land” (601). The Line is a matter of human responsibility; it is a form of culture, and it is *not* a form of culture. Its creation is more a matter of elemental flux, yet it is also reigned in by civilizational form, which does satisfy and does not satisfy desire, the desire for the “ever unreachable point”, the pure combination of form and force. In spite of human responsibility for the Line and the personal engagements of the surveyors, the Line has its own will, “has a Will to proceed Westward” (678). Mason and Dixon are only “Bystanders. Background. Stage-Managers of that perilous Flux, — little more” (545). The “true Drama” of the Line “belongs to others” (619). “[T]he Visto soon is lin’d with Inns and Shops, Stables, Games of Skill, Theatrickals, Pleasure-Gardens ... a Promenade, — nay, Mall, — eighty Miles long. At twilight you could mount to a Platform, and watch the lamps coming on, watch the Visto tapering, in perfect Projection, to its ever-unreachable Point. Pure Latitude and Longitude” (701-02).

As an alternative to Aaron and Dixon’s actual return to England, the narrator envisions a state of affairs, in which they, “detach’d at last, begin consciously to move west. The under-lying Condition of their Lives is quickly establish’d as the Need to keep, as others a permanent address, a perfect Latitude, — no fix’d place, rather a fix’d Motion, — Westering. Whenever they do stop moving, like certain Stars in Chinese Astrology, they lose their Invisibility, and revert to the indignity of being observ’d and available again for earthly purposes” (707). After encountering “towns from elsewhere, coming their way, with entirely different Histories, — Cathedrals, Spanish Musick in the Streets, Chinese Acrobats and Russian Mysticks [...] they discover additionally that ’tis *it* [the Line], now transporting *them*” (708), instead of their directing the Line. By playfully reversing the roles of subject and object, the attribution of responsibility wavers and is indefinitely balanced among possibility, necessity, freedom, and randomness. At the end of their American

adventure, the two surveyors “neither feel [...] British enough anymore, nor quite American, for either Side of the Ocean. They are content to reside like Ferrymen or Bridge-keepers, ever in a Ubiquity of Flow, before a ceaseless Spectacle of Transition” (713).

### 6.3.7.3. John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*

From the beginning Barth has used spatial symbols for the involvement in, and detachment from, time. His first two books, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, have a spatial symbol as title: the first representing the medley but also the duration of life, the second marking the end of comprehensibility and rationalizability of values, probably with reference to Wittgenstein’s conviction that “ethics cannot be put into words” because “values are consigned to silence”, to the realm of the “mystical” (1961, 145). Just as Barth works with a “baroque” and “flabbergasting” plot in *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, the author also works in the latter book with a “baroque” and “flabbergasting” symbolic setting: a complex spatial form. In the “gigantistic” (Harris 150) novel, Barth creates a gigantistic symbol, a computer, as a central locale and a crucial frame of literal and figurative reference. In fact, there are two computers. The whole fictional world is divided into an East and a West Campus, each dominated by a computer, EASCAC and WESCAC, which combine into a vast symbolic configuration. The novel makes university and computer into symbols of the absolute, of the universal (thus also parodying the modern concept of absolute and totalizing form), and of the historical conflict between the East and the West. The computer of the West Campus, WESCAC, which dominates the Campus and all who teach and study there, is indefinite in form and function, though not in power. It is the accounting and control center of the campus. It has the ability to program itself, and by its own logic WESCAC is able to kill, or to “eat” people, “EAT” being “Electroencephalic Amplification and Transmission”, by which people suffer a “‘mental burn-out’ [...] like overloaded fuses” (*GGB* 53). The fantastic mode transforms the signifying vehicle, the vast computer, into a spatial labyrinth; concomitantly, it expands its tenor to embrace a potentially endless number of significations by using as links between the two the notions of causality, analogy, and seriality.

The computer is both object and subject. It has the character of a thing, is a controlling power, yet it seems to possess human reproductive power: though Giles does not know who his father is, he thinks it is the omnipotent WESCAC, a conclusion which, however, is again put in doubt. The semantic tenor of the symbol is thus as wide-reaching and vague as the attributes of its vehicle. The computer is suggestive of the father's archetypal struggle with the son who wants to supplant him, and God as the father of the mythic journey, and the struggle of the "high" and the "low". It points to the role of a metaphysical authority, both God and Satan's; it is the place where the existential moment of lovemaking takes place, and it connotes the idea of the womb. One aspect contradicts and complements the other indefinitely. In this way the computer forms a renewed kind of constructed totality, not in the actuality of a fictional world, but in the endless potentiality of references and ambiguities embedded in a central, universal symbol that makes one think of Kafka's *The Castle*. Using the notions of both analogy and causality as links between vehicle and tenor, the computer in *Giles Goat-Boy* (and *LETTERS*) becomes the all-inclusive symbol for the production of patterns and mysteries, also patterns of narration, a symbol for senseless repetition and reduction, and also for the mystery of energy and effectiveness (the idea is suggested — though not confirmed — that the computer WESCAC is actually the author of the book; the ironic equation of computer and author then returns in *LETTERS*). Both vehicle and tenor are paradoxically both gigantistically expanded and "eaten up", as it were, by the windings, the digressions, hesitations, convolutions of the plot. The overextension of the symbolic significance of university and computer parallels the overextension of the heroic Giles's role, which is constructed according to mythological (Campbell, Raglan) and literary models (*Oedipus Rex*, *The Divine Comedy*), and reaches from the animal world and its instinctual life to the world of religion and religious salvation so that the "call to adventure" that Giles receives is followed on both the physical and the spiritual-religious levels, which the computer parodically integrates. The computer is the central place for the opposition of, on the one hand, archetypal patterns of life, of initiation, growth, leadership, love, and, on the other, ideological fixities and workings of the machine, but again, as in *The Tunnel*, or *Mason & Dixon*. Both the archetypal and the

ideological are conceived as (contrary) forces: forces that strive for control in order to master chaos and forces that work against control, trying to save the vigor of spontaneous experience and of life against generalization and civilizational order. Barth notes that the components of the pattern of the “wandering hero” and of the quest “can be interpreted symbolically with wide latitude, as they are in those various isomorphs: the same model Jung sees as a paradigm of the psychoanalytical experience, somebody else sees as the attempt to account for natural phenomena — Max Müller’s old solar thesis and so forth. Others sees it as a paradigm for the mystic quest; others as a paradigm for every man’s and woman’s progress through the rites of passage”. Barth attempts to draw on all these proposed associations and even comes up with another isomorph: “the wandering hero [in “The Night- Sea Journey”] reenacts the history of a spermatozoon from the moment of ejaculation through the fertilization of the egg” (Ziegler and Bigsby 28).

As mentioned, Barth turns into symbolic figurations not only the narrated situation but also the creative process of writing fiction itself. He employs the given lack of relations against itself in order to create new imaginative relations and to gain “new work”. For Barth, the symbol is an as-if symbol, and the notions of causality and analogy that structure the symbol are as-if links. Commenting on Borges’s short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, Barth writes: “In short, it’s a paradigm of or metaphor for itself; not just the *form* of the story but the *fact* of the story is symbolic; the medium is [...] the message” (1984, 71).<sup>101</sup> This statement presupposes two things: (1) Since narrative can only signify on the basis of concrete situations, “meaning” is made up by building worlds. The “empty center of content”, i.e., nothingness, has to be replaced by something else, by what Barth calls the “method of metonymy” (*Ch* 203), i.e. — in Jameson’s words — “describing its context and the contours of its absence, listing the things that border around it” (1972, 122-23). That is where character, plot, the “filling” details of the narrated situation come in. Taking up the traditional method of metonymy in “realistic” fiction, which symbolize an exhausted worldview and narrative strategy, Barth doubles the perspective and parodies the traditional patterns of character, plot, time, space, i.e., the regulating aspects of the traditional rendering of a story. (2) The other method that Barth mentions is the “Principle of Metaphoric Means” (*Ch*

212). It is in fact the truly symbolic method, the method of “saying what the content is *like*” (Jameson 1972, 122). But, as we have seen, this mode reaches much further than embedding signification in specific things or in situations. It renders the narrative process, as it were, self-reflexively symbolic of itself by making every situation transparent for its constructiveness and the constructedness of every artifact. As nobody else, with perhaps the exception of Pynchon, Barth excels in the combination and fusion of “metonymic” and “metaphoric” methods. By doing so he represents the force of the artefact in its form.

The title story of the collection *Lost in the Funhouse* is exemplary of how narrative and meta-reflection can work together in eliciting the highest symbolic potential of the artefact. Here the notion of analogy is expanded to its utmost limit so that narrative itself becomes both a synecdochal and metaphorical symbol of itself, synecdochal as narration, metaphorical as metafiction, or rather, as metareflection. The whole story is made into a symbol of storytelling and of all kinds of complexity in fiction and life, of the fact that everything points to everything else. The narrated story, the trip of the Mensch family to Ocean City, and the visit to the funhouse of Ambrose, his brother Peter, and Magda G — are used to turn “aspects of fiction into dramatically relevant emblems of the theme, the theme being the problem of story-telling”. Imagination and reflection work together on various levels to make the funhouse, the story of the funhouse, and the storytelling itself into symbols of the artifice. The text of the story is compared to the funhouse and the funhouse to a large machine, a machine “incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ. [...] cunning [...] multifarious vastness” (LF 93). The narratological problems turn the reflection of the narrator(s) towards plot, action, character, theme, sensory details, ending, etc., with direct or indirect intertextual references, for example, to Dos Passos, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Beckett. By tripling the narratological perspective (the story, reflection on the story, the historical development of narrative methods), the author, as it were, gives a “history” of narrative and its forms. Ambrose’s adventures and reflections in the mirror-room, and in the treacherous passages and in what is called the maze are correlated in the story with the *telling* of this experience, which is confusingly done both in terms of actuality and

possibility. The versions of the tale on the metalevel of the narrator's reflections cause the same confusion that Ambrose experiences in the story by missing "the right exit" and by getting lost. In fact, both Ambrose and the narrator get lost and speculate about the prerequisites of perception, reflection and imagining, and about the identity-theme. Ambrose is a character who "took a wrong turn, strayed into the pass *wherein he lingers yet*" (LF 91), and wherein he becomes a storyteller. The narrator, on the other hand, is a storyteller who took a wrong turn and becomes a character in his despair about the lack of progress in the story. Ambrose and the narrator mirror each other both as character and as storyteller, without respect for the boundaries between story and discourse, or between narrated and narrator. Thus, a sequence of aesthetic positions is established that relativize and ironize one kind of narrative stage by the other, confirming emphatically, however, the fundamental human impulse and the need to tell stories — the *labyrinth* being the central symbol of all these significations. We will devote a special section to the labyrinth as form and symbol. Barth himself reasons that "by continually rubbing the audience's nose in the artificial aspect of what you're doing, you're really deliberately confusing the issue you are pretending to clarify, transcending the artifice by insisting on it" (Prince 54).

#### 6.3.7.4. William Gaddis, *JR*

Our next example, Gaddis's *JR*, demonstrates how space in New York can turn into symbolizing place and how the spatial symbol can be made into a playing-ground for sense-negating perspectives, not only by expansion but also by concentration. The 96th street flat of the writer Schramm, who commits suicide, is the quintessential place of the force of chaos, which is here not invigorating but is one way that leads to entropy (the other is stultifying form, see Pynchon's story "Entropy"). But as a symbol of entropy, it is again a form of simultaneity: simultaneity of the aspects of decay, of the decomposition of private life, of business and society and of the arts. The place is counterproductive for the artists Gibbs and Bast because, as Gibbs says, "[p]roblem Bast there's too God damned much leakage around here, can't compose anything with all this energy spilling you've got entropy going everywhere. Radio

leaking under there hot water pouring out so God damned much entropy going on think you can hold all these notes together know what it sounds like? Bast?" (287) All the manuscripts in the apartment — Bast's music notes, Gibb and Eigen's writings — are in states of decay, representing the state of the arts in society. The flat itself is a place of confusion, of the depreciation of order. It is full of trash and waste. Under the "stuff piled up", "things are really screwed up" (555). The domain of sound is also wasted and trashed. The radio is finally so deeply buried that it cannot be switched off; the faucet cannot be turned off because Bast has broken off the handle. The flat exemplifies the postmodern tendency to symbolize by fantasticating the narrated situations, by incongruencies open to all kinds of perspectivization. All the mail for the fictive Grynspan, a person invented by Gibbs and Eigen, gathers here. When the flat becomes the "uptown office" for the JR business group for which Bast acts as a representative, the signs of decay multiply with the overflow of mail, the multitude of objects sent, and the "stuff piled up". The apartment expands/concentrates into a fantasized, spatial center that actually could not possibly hold what it is supposed to contain. There is a radical discrepancy between its alleged function as center of communication for an international group of concerns, and its small size, its state of decay, its overflow of things, its use as private living quarters and its function as a retreat for the creation of music and literature. Referring to communicative entropy, Gibbs speaks of the "whole God damned problem listen whole God damned problem read Wiener on communication, more complicated the message more God damned chance for errors" (403).<sup>102</sup> Since the comic, satirical, and grotesque views all build on a basis of incongruity, and since the more fantastic these discrepancies turn out, the more flexible the perspective can become, the radical fantastication of the place allows one to see entropy and its symbol in a variety of perspectives — and also in a comic spirit. The girl Rhoda comments on the situation from such an angle: "Because like watch that sink in there man [...] I mean if that happens again we might both wake up drowned and nobody would ever know it okay?" (576) Literary references are also used: the place "is like Kafka's" (578). However, it is Kafka's place extended to a greater freedom of (the comic) perspective to a wider play with simultaneity.

### 6.3.7.5. John Hawkes, *The Blood Oranges*

In John Hawkes's *The Blood Oranges*, the phenomena of nature are aestheticized by adding a "second", artificial layer of meaning that does not have its reference-point in a depth-dimension of a concrete, symbolic entity, nor in the mere subjectivity of the experiencing subject, but rather in the surface arrangement of beauty, harmony, and order as such. Hawke's purpose is to attain a configuration of balance and symmetry: a *design*. The artful composition of bodies at the beach overcomes the tension between body and erotics in terms of aesthetics. Perception is here combined with vision and reflection. In the novel, Cyril sees everything with his very aesthetic memory of "the many years of my sexually aesthetic union with Fiona" (BO 55-56). Two symbolic reference-systems are thus imposed upon one another. The sexual, erotic relation is, as it were, *naturally* pre-established, and men and women in their singular or multiple relationships have only to complete the relation *aesthetically* to make it successful. The two couples, Cyril and Fiona, and Hugh and Catherine, lie at the beach at sunset "with legs outstretched, soles of our feet touching or nearly touching, a four-pointed human starfish resting together in the last livid light of the day" (BO 37). Cyril rejoices at the beauty of the human body, "the inertia, suspension, tranquility" (BO 37) that it expresses in the warm, glowing sunlight. To "complete" the picture, Cyril bares Fiona's breasts and hopes that Hugh will do the same with Catherine, so that "this momentary idyll" does not remain "incomplete, unbalanced" (BO 42): "Could he [Hugh] [...] fail to appreciate simple harmonious arrangements of flesh, shadow, voice, hair, which were as much the result of Fiona's artistry as of mine. But perhaps I had been wrong. Perhaps Hugh had no eye for the sex-tableau" (BO 43). Catherine then bares her breasts herself, and this completes the symbolic tableau, its "balance of nudity" (BO 44), the symmetry of sex and erotics, erotics and aesthetics, aesthetics and nature. Cyril relishes the optic harmony and asks himself: "How long would we manage to preserve this balance of nudity?" (BO 44)

As always, balance, symmetry, and completeness are illusions, the stuff of which dreams are made. They are transferred into nature in order to be finally broken up by reflection. Nature serves as a *neutral* medium with which imagination can work,



experiment, and play. The following example from the same book, again a symbolic nature tableau, demonstrates how this double transfer of meaning, the fusion of “grace and chaos, control and helplessness”, first into nature and then back into one’s own situation can acquire an ironic and finally a comic tone, can become incongruous by the incompatibility of vehicle and tenor. The incongruity rouses reflection and serves as the basis of irony and the comic mode, both of which relativize or break up the syntheses:

There on a low wall of small black stones that resembled the dark fossilized hearts of long-dead bulls with white hides and golden horns, there on the wall and silhouetted against the blue sky and black sea were two enormous game birds locked in love. They were a mass of dark blue feathers and silver claws, in the breeze they swayed together like some flying shield worthy of inclusion in the erotic dreams of the most discriminating of all sex-aestheticians. Together we were two incongruous pairs frozen in one feeling, I astride the old bike and hardly breathing, the larger bird atop the smaller bird and already beginning to grow regal, and all the details of that perfect frieze came home to me. Exposed on the bare rock, lightly blown by the breeze, the smaller bird lay with her head to one side and eyes turning white, as if nesting, while above her the big bird clung with gently pillowed claws to the slight shoulders and kept himself aloft, in motion, kept himself from becoming a dead weight on the smooth back of the smaller bird by flying, by spreading his wings and beating them slowly and turning his entire shape into a great slowly hovering blue shield beneath which his sudden act of love was undeniable. Grace and chaos, control and helplessness, mastery and collapse — it was all there, as if the wind was having its way with the rocks. [...] Obviously the two birds mating on the horizon were for me a sign, an emblem, a mysterious medallion, a good omen. They augured well for the time I had spent with Catherine and for my own future in the electrified field of Love’s art (*BO* 14-15).

This is a telling example of how a synecdochally conceived symbol of nature can be transferred into a metaphorical constructionist one, and then evaluated again in synecdochal terms, a process which falsifies the metaphorical construction. Perception and reflection unite to make a natural situation-tableau into an “emblem” of the fusion of human opposites. But the incongruity between perception and interpretation stimulates a second process of reflection that, with self-irony, evaluates awareness as an illusion and ends in (comicalized) doubt as to whether the aesthetic and the natural fuse for more than a moment in view of the forces of chaos and death:

But as I pedaled once more between the funeral cypresses and approached the villa, I found myself wondering if in the brief twining of that dark blue feathery pair I had actually witnessed Catherine's dead husband and my own wife clasping each to each the sweet mutual dream which only months before had been denied them by the brief gust of catastrophe that had swept among us. Yes, Hugh and Fiona in the shape of birds and finding each other, so to speak, in final stationary flight. Could it have been? I smiled to realize that the pleasure and truth of the vision were worth pondering (*BO* 15-16).

The final step in this symbolizing and de-symbolizing process, which demonstrates the need of symbolic thinking and its inevitable failure, is the playful acceptance of both symbolic thought and the defeat of its meaning: the vision, mentioned in the quote above, was "worth pondering". Play unites the incongruous in symbolic thought and again dissolves the synthesis in a double-poled movement of to and fro. Hawkes says in an interview that Cyril "is trying to talk about paradox, or the existence of that which does not exist" (Bellamy 1974, 99), but Hawkes asserts that Cyril is also "a comic character" (100). The author is trying "to deal with the components, the parts, the inadequate fragments of human nature" (102), but also with "the power, beauty, fulfillment, the possibility that is evident in any actual scene we exist in" (107); the power, or the force, however, does not "exist unless you bring it into being" (107), i.e., see and articulate it symbolically. The counter-symbol in the book to this symbol of possibility, "of freedom from constriction, constraint, death" (112) is "the medieval atrocity" (112), the chastity belt discovered in the depth of a ruined building, which in Hawkes's words "is a central image in *The Blood Oranges*. It is central to everything I've written. That is, my fiction is generally an evocation of the nightmare or terroristic universe in which sexuality is destroyed by law, by dictum, by human perversity, by contraption" (Bellamy 1974, 112).

In Hawkes as in Pynchon or Barth, the symbol is infinitely rich in connotations, and the tenor wavers between openness and closure, revelation and falsification of meaning with a gap in-between that provides space for the ineffable. The result of this strategy of openness is that the symbolic method also fulfills the preconditions of situationalism. As Joseph W. Slade says about Pynchon, "[s]ymbols are lightning rods for spiritual energy [...] For

all its ambiguity, the ability to metaphorize and symbolize is the most powerful weapon in the human psychological arsenal, and Pynchon's faith in its efficiency brings him down firmly on the side not of Freud but of his rival, Carl Jung" (1983, 184). We will now turn to Barthelme's pictorial stories "The Balloon" and "The Glass Mountain". These texts are further examples of how symbolical meaning and anti-symbolic deconstruction can work playfully with and against one another.

### **6.3.7.6. Donald Barthelme: "The Glass Mountain" and "The Balloon"**

Of all postmodern writers, Barthelme uses spatial symbols in the most playful sense, with an extreme "pre-meditated distance". Both of his pictorial stories, "The Glass Mountain" and "The Balloon", are "symbolic" stories, even though they are symbolic in a transformed and reduced, in fact comicalizing sense. "The Balloon" is a fantastic version of a "symbolic" story; it first establishes a vehicle, the balloon, and then makes the story into a search for the multivalent tenor. "The Glass Mountain" is a more complex, fundamentally more reflexive story; it is in fact a symbolic-anti-symbolic story, working in paradoxical terms, both confirming and doubting the meaningfulness of the symbolic method for postmodern times. It is actually a reflection in narrative terms about both the necessary existence and the necessary dissolution of the traditional symbol, or rather, of its hidden properties and spiritual tenor.

The glass mountain, about which "[e]veryone in the city knows" (*CL* 59), and which "towers over that part of Eight Avenue like some splendid, immense office building", vanishing "into the clouds, or on cloudless days, into the sun" (*CL* 60) is again a symbol with a wide-reaching tenor that stands for, and in fact contracts and superimposes, a simultaneity of times, of actualities, and of meanings. While ascending the glass mountain, the climber reflects about the reasons that one would climb such a mountain, an adventure which many "knights" have failed to complete successfully and have paid for with their lives. He finally finds the reason for his climbing-adventure in the fact that the glass mountain, or rather, "the castle of pure gold" at the top of it, is "a beautiful

enchanted symbol” (CL 61). Yet the reason for climbing up to the “enchanted symbol” is split:

58. Does one climb a glass mountain, at considerable personal discomfort, simply to disenchant a symbol?

59. Do today’s stronger egos still *need* symbols?

60. I decided that the answer to these questions was “yes”.

61. Otherwise what was I doing there, 206 feet above the power-sawed elms, whose white meat I could see from my height (CL 62).

The climber of the glass mountain furthermore cites the definition of the traditional symbol from *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (“it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone sees”), and finally makes use of what the narrator calls “these conventional means of attaining the castle” (CL 63). Kafka comes to mind. These conventional means the climber takes from a story in *The Yellow Fairy Book*. In an intertextual interchange of his own status with that of the climber in the story from this book, he puts into work a fantastic transformation: “The eagle dug its sharp claws into the tender flesh [...] The creature in terror lifted him [the actual climber of the glass mountain] high up into the air and began to circle the castle [...] The bird rose up in the air with a yelp, and the youth dropped lightly onto a broad balcony [...] he saw a courtyard filled with flowers and trees, and there, the beautiful enchanted princess” (CL 63- 64). The structure of the symbol, the indissoluble interrelation of vehicle and tenor, is now made the basis of the narrative process — but in reverse terms. What the climber sees is the separation of the inseparable, of vehicle and tenor. He now existentially and painfully *experiences* the failure of the meaning-giving function of the symbol, a circumstance that he *knew* from the beginning. Yet the existential engagement is cut back, even reversed by the contrast between existential experience and the diagrammatic reductive style of the story, which de-existentializes the quality of the experience. By leaving gaps, rejecting psychological frames, denying emotion an “adequate” expression, and contrasting ways of perception and response, Barthelme gains the freedom of playful ambivalence in the handling of symbolic signification. The climber proceeds in his narrative: “I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful

princess” (*CL* 64-65). By losing its tenor, the symbolic vehicle loses the function of a symbol, and becomes “merely” a beautiful princess. The logical consequence is its deconstruction as a symbol, a process which here is literalized into physical destruction:

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances.

99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her.

100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment (*CL* 65).

In “The Balloon”, the gigantic balloon that, seemingly for no reason or purpose, enwraps most of Manhattan and thus creates a “concrete particular” (*UP* 16) world of its own, is, as the reader finds out only at the end, the personal expression of “unease” and “sexual deprivation”, “a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure” (*UP* 21) of the narrator on the occasion of his beloved’s absence. When the pictorial statement of the feeling of deprivation is “no longer necessary or appropriate” because she has returned from Norway, the balloon is after twenty-two days dismantled and “stored in West Virginia, awaiting some other time of unhappiness, sometime, perhaps, when we are angry with one another” (*UP* 21). Yet the balloon is more than the outlet and representation of a private feeling. It answers a common need: the arousal and expression of spontaneity, pleasure, unprogrammed feeling, etc. Up to the last paragraph that reveals its private meaning, the balloon is the image of the force of possibility, indefiniteness, and the ineffable compared to the actuality of the real and the fixity of normality: “The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet” (*UP* 21). It liberates the self from the tyranny of “complex machinery, in virtually all kinds of operations; as this tendency increases, more and more people will turn, in bewildered inadequacy, to solutions for which the balloon may stand as a prototype, or ‘rough draft’” (*UP* 21). Again Barthelme plays with ironic constructs, using the different strictures of the symbol. On the one hand, the symbol is restructured in its meaning, being linked by causality to a concrete reason, i.e., the “sexual deprivation” and the “unease” of the narrator. On the other hand, it is radically serial in its “lack of finish” and the infinite

possibilities of its meaning. In fact, this is ultimately a symbol of liberating the force of *nonmeaning* that is the radical *openness of meaning* from the stifling forms of meaning. The reactions of people show “a certain amount of initial argumentation about the ‘meaning’ of the balloon”; this, however,

subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena. It was agreed that since the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely, extended discussion was pointless, or at least less purposeful than the activities of those who, for example, hung green and blue paper lanterns from the warm gray underside, in certain streets, or seized the occasion to write messages on the surface (*UP* 16).

More than any other postmodern writer, Barthelme employs the symbol to deconstruct the symbol and then reconstruct it, which he does with irony and satire, yet in playful terms (which include the ironic and the comic modes). Causality as link between vehicle and tenor is merely experimented and played with; analogy only exists as connecting principle in that it connects part with part in the sense of non-analogy. Seriality is openness: it gives the situation autonomy. As a compositional principle, it links the narrated situations and their tenors only by indefiniteness, contingency, spontaneity, by liberated feeling. In its being “not limited, or defined” in its “ability [...] to shift its shape, to change”, to please “people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available” (*UP* 20-21), the balloon turns into the symbol of the (limitless freedom of the) *imagination* itself and the glass mountain into the symbol of the *failure of the imagination* to overcome the cliché and achieve a new release. What is expressed by pictorial symbols in Barthelme’s so-called picture stories is an emotion of dissatisfaction and the fundamental desire for a change of principles. This desire for openness gives occasion to “theorize” about the symbol in concrete terms and by reflecting about the symbol to deconstruct it, but then, out of necessity, to *reconstruct* it, again in concrete terms, as the signifier of the desire for the other, for energy, spontaneity, the unpatternable, the force against everything that takes on narrow and rigid form.

The symbolic method of postmodern fiction makes quite clear that its central strategy is that which already characterized modernism, the striving for meaning and its failure, with the dif-

ference that the postmodern failure is fully translated into form and perspectivized in multiple ways by play, irony, and the comic mode. The attempt at control by the aesthetic design may be considered as the inheritance from *modern* narrative; the knowledge, playful acceptance, and direct utterance of the failure of control (because of the multiplication of relations, the situationalizing and serializing of composition) is the *postmodern* deconstructive and reconstructive ingredient of the symbol.

### 6.3.8. The Labyrinth

The central metaphor for postmodern fiction, the crucial figuration for its content, design, narrative strategies, the paradoxicality of its intention and goal, is spatial: it is the *labyrinth*.<sup>103</sup> As intricate structure, the labyrinth can assume two or, depending on the viewpoint, three forms. While the first pattern of the labyrinth is unicursal, the second and third are multicursal.<sup>104</sup> The classical Cretan labyrinth, built by Daedalus at the command of King Minos to exact revenge upon Athens for the death of his son Androgeus, is unicursal. According to antique legend, the Minotaur lived in the maze at Knossos and every nine years devoured or killed the seven young men and seven young women who were sent from Athens as tribute to King Minos. Theseus, it is told, put an end to this cruel practice by entering the labyrinth, slaying the Minotaur and successfully returning to the entrance, the beginning of the labyrinth, with the help of a thread that the King's daughter, Ariadne, had given him. In spite of the intricacy of the paths, the twisting, unfolding, and refolding lines of space, the labyrinth is unicursal. It leads unfailingly to its center and has an affirmative nature. Eco underlines this point by emphasizing that the classical Daedelian maze is linear and predetermined; it involves entering, reaching the center, and exiting, the Minotaur merely being there "to make the whole thing a little more exciting [...] and [...] one *cannot* get lost: the labyrinth itself is an Ariadne thread" (1984b, 80). It is form, only seemingly the figuration of force, force of the incalculable.

According to Eco, there are two types of the multicursal labyrinth. The one is *centered* and *coded*. Its dominant characteristic is the presence of false turnings and repeated choices. The turnings and choices are binary and divide into right or wrong, effective or

non-effective; the procedure involved in reaching the center and in finding the way out is a combination of (1) forming a hypothesis and (2) following it, a process of trial and error, both of which rely on a definite code, for instance of wholeness, identity, etc. This is the modernist labyrinth, which includes the possibility of failure, but not the suspension of dualities and values. It comprises the breaking of form but not its suspension or radical renewal. The second type of the multicursal labyrinth is *decentered* and *uncoded*. It has no simple way out and no single correct interpretation. It evolves into the more radical “rhizomic” labyrinth that confounds reason, reveals the unknown and engages human beings at the core of their resources for survival or renewal. The term “rhizomic” is used by Deleuze and Guattari<sup>105</sup> to designate the decentered lines that constitute multiplicities; rhizomic lines are non-hierarchical lines that connect with other lines in random, unregulated, open-ended relationships and shapes. They build a system of ramifications, a flow in a myriad of directions. There is no beginning and no end, but only the middle of dynamic movement and continuous change, which can form no identity. This is the postmodern kind of labyrinth that is pure force, the force of possibilities. It contains as aspects or dimensions an indissoluble interface of all the paradoxes mentioned. According to Barth, the “labyrinth, after all, is a place, in which, ideally, all the possibilities of choice (of direction in this case) are embodied, and [...] must be exhausted before one reaches the heart” (1984, 75) — if one reaches the heart, which nobody does.

The important thing is that this decentered labyrinth contains the other two, both the classical unicursal and the centered multicursal. The idea of a center is important even if it is absent, and the possibility of making right-or-wrong choices is crucial for the “inclusiveness” of the labyrinth, though there may be no such choices. Thus the dichotomy of form and force determines the “rhizomic” labyrinth. It contains form-lines that direct binary oppositions, then force-lines that resist such “normalcy” and linearity, and finally lines of pure force that shatter any idea of continuity, establishing the principle of multiplicity, of a network not of signifying signs, but of relations between signs capable of limitless, ever-changing interpretations that turn the labyrinth into a “mode of conjecture” (realized in Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*). The labyrinth can therefore be structured, but only hypothetically, never definitely,



“not only because the rhizome is multi-dimensionally complicated, but also because its structure changes through the time” (Eco 1984b, 82). Decenterment adds to the labyrinth the modality and creativeness of infinite possibilities, but also the destructiveness of waste and sterility, of tedium and failure, in short, of nihilism. With the suspension of boundaries between subject and object, the labyrinth ultimately becomes the Self, and the outside world crumbles. In the work of Borges and other postmodern fictionists, the labyrinth is nothing more than the Self, but the Self that paradoxically saves itself from being the victim of the labyrinth by making itself its heart: “This duration, this feeling of eternity makes me the center of the labyrinth, in this way I am liberated, while the labyrinth crumbles” (Borges 55).

The great narrative and symbolic potential of the multicursal labyrinth, its expandability into *infiniteness*, makes it attractive for postmodern authors like Borges, Barth, Barthelme, Calvino, Eco, Hawkes, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, and others. Its ironic structure constitutes a field of opposing forces held in equilibrium. Depending on its interpretation, it is either a *closed* or an *open system*. It is *entropic* and *negentropic*. It is hermetically sealed and yet paradoxically gives room to “the old myths of departure, of loss, and of return” (Foucault 1986, 78). It is journey and destination. It comprises the notion of trap, or puzzle, or mirror of life and death, and it also mirrors *end* and *endlessness*, both limitless invention and intricate and tortuous windings. Being endless, it is both *sequential* and *simultaneous* in its orientation. It is determined by *secrecy* and open to *discovery*. It envelops, and it points beyond itself. It is joined to *necessity* (at the beginning and the center) and to *chance*, to randomness and *waste* in the maze of paths; it offers protection and danger, *death* and *resurrection*. The labyrinth is constructed of dualities: rewards and punishments, *good* and *evil*, *predetermination* and *freedom*, *oneness* and *polarization*, *unity* and the *dissipation* of unity. It is thus the figure of being always on the threshold, and it shows the order of the *enigma*. Combining all perspectives into one, it makes storytelling the symbol of life and consciousness. Life’s and Consciousness’s twists and transformations give rise to self-reflexivity and metamorphosis. Foucault speaks of a “*metamorphosis-labyrinth*” (1986, 94; italics added). It opens “the line to infinity, the other, the lost” as well as “the circle” and “the return to

the same". Metamorphosis and the (dis)order of the labyrinth combine in the movement of language towards infinity (cf. Bartheleme), towards saying "other things with the same words, to give to the same words another meaning" (1986, 96). That is exactly what Brautigan does in his novel *Trout Fishing in America*, when he establishes a maze of meaning for the title phrase.

There is another important differentiation as to how one experiences a labyrinth. One can be inside or outside. In the first case, the temporal element is superimposed on the spatial one and exerts the supreme determining influence it always has in verbal art, and especially in narrative; in the second case, the labyrinth reveals itself as an intricate spatial construct that can have symbolic meaning. If the narrated person is caught in the maze, and the temporal aspect of movement dominates the intricacy of the multicursal design, then the behavior/action of the character takes on the nature of the *quest* with a path-goal/exit figuration, even though the goal may be only an illusion, an hallucination, or a projection. While a character inside the labyrinth may find his or her situation inextricable, intrinsically unstable and meaningless, the reader, surmounting the perspective of the narrated character, may find the narrative design, seen from "outside", intricate but meaningful. In the case of the character, he or she may be confronted with a rhizomic type of labyrinth that makes no sense at all, while the reader is faced with the encyclopedic kind of labyrinth that — even if it does not allow for an unraveling of the lines and one single interpretation — at least contains clues and symbols as to the range of its significance. This is the modernist situation in its extreme form, and Kafka's *Castle* is the preeminent example.

In many, if not most, postmodern variants the author will produce, and both character and reader will enter, an all-encompassing rhizomic kind of labyrinth, a labyrinth of lines of force, of contrarities, of limitless possibilities (of plots and perspectives) that allow no linear progress, no final conclusion, and have no ultimate "meaning" in any kind of combination. The author/narrator emphasizes here the emergence of the labyrinth from the heart, the center, seeing him- or herself, in spite of the inevitable presence of intertextuality, as the creator and master of the maze-like windings and choices (even if this might be an as-if pose). In this case the time factor is manifest as a process of permanent strategic

change; it is meant to guarantee that the text, or rather, the communication process between text and reader, does not become entropic, i.e., fixed in symbolic constellations, but that the labyrinthine fictional landscape, seen from “outside”, represents itself as a scene full of simultaneous possibilities, endlessly changing. By projecting unlimited possibilities, the labyrinth unfolds not only its stifling but also its creative negentropic potential in unending paths, infinite twists, and rewindings, rendering the maze as inexhaustible narrative form. Even if the conceptual labyrinth is not named as such and has no specific shape, its relational, diagrammatic figurations together with the disoriented wanderings of the character(s) and their experience of bafflement in maze-like situations, or the indicative physical details, are often enough to evoke the image of the maze.

The creative potential of the labyrinth is heightened by the fact that the relations within the fictional labyrinth are not only horizontal. Gaps and empty spaces left in the path and between points of direction reveal levels below. The labyrinthine motions of the creative mind in the character or the narrator or both, run on the surface, because only the surface offers unlimited space. Yet the yearning for meaning, for values can never be put off completely. If no core of truth is visible in the decentered maze, if essence as the depth-dimension is no longer available, and the surface remains without hierarchy of places so that one position relativizes the other. Center and goal go, as it were, into hiding and are only expressed in their absence, as the *void*, thus forming *ex negativo* the inexpressible, vertical dimension of the labyrinth. This void is the place of mystery, and as such it can be filled with projections that arise out of the *waste* of existence, out of fear and disorientation, out of paranoia. They call up out of nothingness a mysterious, hidden game-master in what is conceived of as a game of hide and seek, with the narrated person being played with by an outside Force, a mysterious “They” (Pynchon), in the multidirectional labyrinths of the fictional world. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the concept of *waste*, the image of the *labyrinth*, and the mystery of the *void* form a cluster of associations that inform postmodern fiction (see Hoffmann “Waste”).

### 6.3.9. The Written Page as Labyrinth of Reading and Seeing: The Mutual Suspension of Simultaneity and Succession in Sukenick and Federman

The labyrinth is also one of language. In Beckett's *The Unnamable*, it is the labyrinth of language and the succession of words that keep the character, the Unnamable, alive. The postmodern author cannot overcome the difficulty of writing coherently and meaningfully, of coming to an end; he faces failure and reflects about it. Sukenick writes in *Up*:

I must make it up as I go along, the hell with it, I'm finishing today [...] Maybe I better keep it up a while longer, what am I going to do when I'm done? No, impossible. It's dissolving into words, script on paper (329).

In Sukenick the unraveling principle of mere succession determines both metareflection and the structure of the narrative. In his novel *Out* (1973), the shift of situations on the journey "from the clutter and hassle of the East to the pure space of an empty California beach" (Klinkowitz 1975, 137) prevents logical order and coherent plot. But then the spatial labyrinth is transferred to the *materiality* of the book, the arrangement of pages, the interspacing of white spaces on the page, and thus to the reading process. The writer complicates the order of sequentiality by running the sequence of chapter numbers against the rising page numbers. Towards the end, the blank spaces between the verbal units increase until the text finally withdraws into the empty page, so that the end position of the book is surrendered by language to dissolution, a drifting-off into the infiniteness of white space that even abandons the principle of serial succession. Sukenick finally ends his novel *98.6*, according to the artistic principle of mere succession, by letting his last sentence unravel without punctuation, and combines the principle of succession now quite conspicuously with that of simultaneity, the two structural principles of the multicursal labyrinth, by repeating, and writing in capital letters, the phrase AT THE SAME TIME:

AT THE SAME TIME my life is unraveling AT THE SAME TIME the novel is bungled fragments stitched together AT THE SAME TIME everything is seamless perfect not because because but AT THE SAME TIME playing the blues letting it go it is as it is. Another failure (188).

In fact, it seems that a group of postmodern writers, among them most prominently Sukenick and Federman, but also Barthelme (cf. *Snow White*), have made the abstraction and combination of the textual units into the purity of *succession* and *simultaneity*, of temporal sequence and spatial form, a new kind of artistic formula that transforms the modernist semantic concept of wholeness as well as the ground phenomena of the story, namely suspense and meaning, into *labyrinthine relations* of words or word-formations *on the page*. The transformation of imagining worlds into “seeing” words, word designs, and empty spaces on the page dissolves the priority of the story, makes the medium language and the material distribution of words and sentences on white space the focus. Sukenick writes: “Opacity implies that we should direct our attention to the surface of a work, and such techniques as graphics and typographical variations, in calling the reader’s attention to the technological reality of the book, are useful in keeping his mind on that surface instead of undermining it with profundities” (*Surfiction* 45). Critics like Alan Wilde have drawn attention to the parallel with painting: “[I]t’s difficult to avoid the inference that a good deal of contemporary literature represents a belated response to the by now familiar imperatives of modern painting”; and he quotes Clement Greenberg: “The limitations that constitute the medium of painting — the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment — were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly” (*Horizons* 171). It is obvious that for Sukenick, Federman, but also Barthelme in *Snow White*, or Gass in *The Tunnel*, the spatial medium of the page and its organization is part of the message, perhaps actually the symbol of the message. The symbol by now has moved from space, time, character, action, and language, to the mere materiality of words on the page and the arrangement of spaces on the page.

Federman has driven this process to the extreme. The subtitle to the “Pretext” of *Take It or Leave It*, is called “a spatial displacement of words”. Spatial displacement of words is here meant quite literally. Not only does the book have no page numbers (and therefore no beginning, center, or end) because the order of numbers,

according to Cassirer would depend on and establish the orders of space and time, but language itself is also deconstructed into labyrinthine (non)formations because “the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open” (C. Olson 120). In addition to the fact that many pages are typographically different (a method taken over from Federman’s first novel *Double or Nothing*, where no two pages look fully alike), all forms of order end in mere word-patterns that disown any idea of narrative and logical order. The reason for these experiments of course is the focusing of attention not even on language, which is a system of order, but the materiality of words and their arrangement. This strategy aims, as “concrete” poetry does, at a “visually perceptible literature” (Kriwet) by forcing the reader to lay the emphasis on simultaneously *seeing* the page and *reading* it. Thus the form of language and the composition of the page are turned from stabilizing form into disruptive force. By an unconventional arrangement of the words on the page, Federman deconstructs not only the referential quality of language and the good continuation of time (a continuation that would result from an easy prevailing of semantics over the stoppage of words), but also disrupts even the good continuation of words by spatially displacing them into a multicursal labyrinth. The first page of the “Pretext” (and of the book) looks like the following:

One could imagine that it happened this way:  
 in the beginning  
 words scattered  
 by chance  
 and in all directions!

Ucnrleegee  
 notoldnris!

Wild lines of words would have crossed the sheets of paper  
 obeying only their own furor.

The pencil of the writer  
 his fingertips  
 his pen (machine) would have followed them.  
 Little by little  
 as words became more numerous  
     more compact  
     gathered together  
     rushed together  
 into certain regions of the paper



## 7. Character

Character can be understood as essence or function. It is (1) a unique *substance*, an autonomous subject, and the strategic place for will, desire, freedom, and responsibility. Human nature is universal and elemental; the self and the world are accessible to rational epistemology. Or, (2) character is a *function* and particle in a network of historical beliefs, conventions, in a system of operations that sanctions only its own projects. The subject is the place of temporal difference, not permanent substance; it confirms and interprets only that which has already happened. In the first case, literature will be concerned with the process of characterization and its development from existence to essence, with the exploration and interpretation of the human psyche, the idiosyncrasies, desires, and needs of the self, its moral code, its identity with itself or its split and alienation. A system of implications directs the reader to discover behind the surface the “depth”, the true self and its timeless structure. In the second instance, the self-centered character is an artificial construct, a conventional idea, a mask that indeed may mask the fact that it is a mask and therefore needs to be de-masked. Character is here never a result but always a process directed by others, by organizations, or forces. It is not homogeneous but heterogeneous, is defined not by an essential unique identity but a historical condition and a multiplicity of roles in the mobile interrelation with other people and the environment, with power-systems, institutions, religious and cultural traditions, and language-patterns. The idea that the essential individual is an axiomatic given is revealed as illusion, as inherently ideological, and can be shown already to be a problem in traditional and modern texts.

The structure of the narrated situation reflects the concept of character as essence or function. If character is conceived as essence, it dominates the situation, and the latter concentrates on the internal and external relations that rouse feelings, thoughts, and actions, on the connection between appearance and true core, on the moral bent, on conflicts and change. If the character does not dominate as



essence but is only an agent in the creation of the world, then the narrated situation will be decentralized; the character loses its superior role in the situation and ceases to exist as a self-centered unity and a primary frame of reference and becomes subservient to temporality and the primacy of language, pattern, and reception. This is the victory of the surface-view of character over the depth-view, which has become a problem or has seemingly disappeared in postmodern fiction. Already Brecht, according to Walter Benjamin, noted that “[d]epth doesn’t get you anywhere at all. Depth is a separate dimension, it’s just depth — and there’s nothing whatsoever to be seen in it” (1977a, 110). And Richard Rorty protests against “the self-deception of thinking that we possess a deep, hidden, metaphysically significant nature which makes us ‘irreducibly’ different from inkwells or atoms” (1980, 373). Don DeLillo remarks (setting “modern” for “postmodern”) that “[m]any modern characters have a flattened existence — purposely — and many modern characters exist precisely nowhere” (DeCurtis 62). Depthlessness is used quite intentionally as a counter-strategy against aesthetic and psychological closure evolving from the depth-view of identity and truth. Against the ideology of “depth”, the novel employs “the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape in the flattest possible diction” (Newman 28). Yet, again, this is only half the truth. For the reader, even behind the “flattest possible characters” looms the whole humanistic tradition, the belief in psychological depth and the existential self.

In the following sections, character is placed in the context of traditional-essentialist, of structural and poststructural theories. The idea of an essential self emphasizes the notions of identity, uniqueness, and authenticity, of a stable core and an indissoluble center of the self. It comes to dominate modernist fiction. Postmodernism no longer highlights interiority and the psychological code, though it does not abolish the idea of a full-fledged character. Structuralism turns character from being an essence into a functionary, an actant in a process or in literary designs, a vehicle for collecting qualities and actions. Function is defined as intratextual function, while essence is an alien concept externally construed. Poststructuralism and its culture of difference emphasize immanence and proliferation, indefiniteness and mobility, the dissemination of meaning and the avoidance of closure. Multiplicity, simultaneity, and

openness are the keywords for the approach to character. Both structuralism and poststructuralism combine to dissolve character as unique and authentic self, but they obviously cannot do without the idea of a “subject” as the bearer or meeting point of energies, and forces, narrative processes and forms. We will analyze the different concepts of character that rival and struggle with one another, mix in the concrete cases, and of course have to confront the expectations of the reader. A short analysis of Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* will exemplify the postmodern play with both the fictionality of character and the idea of its externality to narrative and language.

### **7.1. The Systematic View: The Essentialist Self, Identity, Uniqueness, and Authenticity**

One central problem in the analysis of the narrated character derives from the fact that the schema of characterization (as every schema) is dual, that character in fact is double-coded, is imitation and construction, stabilized by expectation. “[C]haracters are utterly embedded in texts and utterly detachable from them” (Hochman 74); they are both people and words. On the one hand, they are mental and linguistic constructs, textual entities, with connotations of plurality, dispersion and multiple stories of the self,<sup>106</sup> and on the other they have strong bonds to what in the lifeworld (also that of the reader) are considered the properties of character, even if the characters are reduced in the text to “figures”.<sup>107</sup> (For reasons of convenience and to avoid the pitfalls of all too rigid categorization, we will use interchangeably the terms “character”, “figure”, and also “subject”, with only a few exceptions.) Roland Barthes explains: “On the one hand, the characters (whatever one calls them — *dramatis personae* or *actants*) form a necessary plane of description, outside of which the slightest reported ‘actions’ cease to be intelligible; so that it can be said that there is not a single narrative in the world without ‘characters,’ or at least without agents. Yet on the other hand, these — extremely numerous — ‘agents’ can be neither described nor classified in terms of ‘persons’” (1977, 105). John Barth derives from this tension between the textual and referential dimension of character the “tragic — or skeptical — view of characterization”, namely that “the characters that are achieved are finally fictitious characters. The tragic view of characterization is that

we cannot, no matter how hard we try, make real people by language. We can only make verisimilitudinous people. That view itself is on the minds of the characters themselves in a novel like *LETTERS*, and it's very much on the author's mind in a novel like *LETTERS*" (Ziegler and Bigsby 38).

It is obvious that the fictional character can never surpass being a construct, but this construct can also never lose its connection with what Barth calls "real people" and their essential concerns. It is true of *all* texts that the relation to "real" people and their concerns can never be fully suspended. This means that the (essentialistic) concept of character cannot just disappear. Indeed, even as a "minus function" (Lotman), as mere presence in absence, the full-fledged character of the humanistic tradition acts as a horizon to and a corrective in the text. Jameson speaks of "the stubbornly anthropomorphic nature of our present categories of character" (1975a, 211). The double-poled orientation of the fictional character towards imaginary constructedness and dependent relationship to "life" creates what one might call the *paradox* of characterization in postmodern fiction, a dialectic without synthesis. Though this paradox is effective in every narrative, it leads to different results in every single text; in Barthes's words, the "idea of a model transcendent to several texts" has to be counterbalanced by the analysis of the individual character in the individual text, for "each text [...] must be treated in its difference, 'difference' being understood here precisely in a Nietzschean or Derridean sense" (1971, 44). Both the general matrix of characterization in fiction and its individual expression in the concrete text rely on certain basic assumptions and qualifications about the human self that have been developed by philosophy, psychology, and sociology and are marked by wholeness, uniqueness, autonomy, and self-awareness, a development of ideas one need take note of when discussing the role of character in postmodern fiction.

The character-models advanced by philosophy and psychology of course are in themselves divergent and evolve out of the spirit of the times. Two philosophical traditions that hold different concepts of identity are important in the historical development of character-models.<sup>108</sup> The continental philosophical tradition from Descartes to Leibniz and Hegel assigns substantial identity (Descartes, Leibniz), or at least an *a priori* unity (Kant), to

the creative, absolute “I” as an all-embracing thinking subject that actively structures the world. The Anglo-American philosophical tradition from Locke to John Stuart Mill and Behaviorism inclines to empiricism and eclecticism and stresses instead a rather passive and receptive “I”, whose identity has strong social components. William James, in trying to reconcile the two philosophical traditions, can be considered the founder of the modern conception of identity (*Principles of Psychology*). His psychological distinctions, which helped to make psychology a modern pragmatic discipline in its own right, show the changes from substantialism to relativism (and relationism). He no longer speaks of “the” world but of many worlds of current perception (though the world of the senses had for him still a preferential status). He thus paved the way (just as Nietzsche did with his “perspectivism”) for the postmodern conception of multiple realities of equal status and the possibility of entertaining different attitudes towards the created worlds. James’s pragmatic and relativistic concept of the self in the world thus opens the way for a definition of the self by means of the multiple modes in which the self relates to the world. Freud’s analysis of the unconscious regions of the mind complicates the understanding of character by giving it a “vertical” structure with a preprogrammed conflict between the conscious and the unconscious, with the dialectic of the “id” and the “superego”, and the “ego” as a mediator between the two. Under postmodern auspices, the balancing power of the ego, however, has waned and the force of the “fragmenting” and “desublimating” “unstructured desires” appear able to dissolve the socially determined, past-oriented, repressive stability of character in favor of the dimension of the future, of possibility, kinesis, and “freedom” (Bersani).<sup>109</sup>

The interiority of character is highly individual, structured by private thoughts, emotions and desires, and not conducive to abstraction in categories of definition; and yet, a system of differentiation is obviously necessary for heuristic purposes. There have been attempts to establish categories that separate full-fledged, comprehensive, mature, or outstanding characters from less developed, conventional, and stereotyped ones. Interestingly enough, the attempts at a typology of character in fiction do not rely on character alone but summon other viewpoints, the support of the natural constituents of the situation, of time and space. E.M. Forster

rests his distinction of characters on *time*. Using a psychological point of view, he defines “round” characters in temporal terms by surprise and development, and “flat” characters by their lack of them; being without inner life, the latter “are constructed round a single idea or quality” (73-81). Though the opposition of “flat” and “round” is too schematic and does not take into account the character’s function — the ability of a “flat” character like Huckleberry Finn, for instance, to focus the social world in which he lives and thus to gain in stature<sup>110</sup> — this differentiation of characters has been extremely influential because it rests on an elementary category. Time suggests change, growth, evolution, and progress and thus offers a synthesis of the natural (time) and social frame (character, action) of the narrated situation. While Forster’s typology of characters is based on time, on dynamis and stasis, surprise and development, or the lack of them, Jurij Lotman uses the other possibility of connecting character and the natural frame. He employs a “spatial” viewpoint. His character-types are based on cultural boundaries. These boundaries are ethical or epistemological, defined by culture and break-of-culture. They exist between the good and the bad, and between the known and the unknown. While the conventional character remains within the boundaries of tradition and conforms to the established rules, the other type transgresses the borderline into the unusual and the unknown; this character is strange in many of its traits and extraordinary in temperament, in vision and sense of duty (see Lotman). It features an intense desire for openness, expansion, and change, and the extreme energy that empowers desire.

Postmodern fiction blurs many of these differentiations. The dualism of Forster’s character model is cancelled; the opposition between “flat” and “round” has lost its heuristic usefulness since the idea of essence has lost its currency, and “flatness” and “roundness” have become a matter of perspective and merge in the multidimensional being. The transition of boundaries that Lotman makes his distinguishing feature has been the target of irony and play. The hero’s break with culture in Gaddis’s *J.R.* or Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* induces a satire on the reifying consistencies of culture that engulf the individual rather than a liberating expansion in heroic deeds. There is not even a gleam of utopianism, neither in terms of the hero’s deed nor the change of the social environment. A combination of perspectives complicates the picture. Just as the

social milieu is the target of satire, the hero and his deeds become victims of the comic mode.

The question, however, remains: what is a fully grown character? Forster's notions of surprise and development for many critics are too formal and simple to allow for a full account of the inner life of the character. The life of the psyche is private, fluid, and uncategorizable: it is pure force. If one adheres to the idea that character is judgeable by "objective" standards, the fluidity and opacity of consciousness hamper rationalizations, and one need engage in intellectual values and morals, and judge actions in terms of morals, i.e., emphasize the forms of structured behavior. W.J. Harvey and Charles Child Walcutt follow this path. Their ideas of what the narrated character is or should be derive from their shared conviction that the character has an integral personality that is *knowable*, that we can indeed have an "immediate, even visceral" sense of a person's "reality" (7). The character is formed in the conflict of values. The author's task is to provide an "intrinsic knowledge" of the characters he or she creates because the intimate knowledge of the self is the "prime reason for our enjoyment of fiction" (W.J. Harvey 32). In spite of the moral reasoning, one can again describe Harvey and Walcutt's argument in terms of space and time; in fact, all typologies of character are created with the assistance of the natural frame, i.e., space and time. In their case, the character has a steadfast center; it does not change, and (the influence of) time is minimized in favor of psychic ("spatial") stability. Or rather, time and the force of conflict, trial, and proof of worth are used to confirm the stability of form, of the center. Walcutt emphasizes the necessity of providing the reader with a "knowledge-experience" of the character, a knowledge that is "detached, aesthetic, and intellectual". He foregrounds as integrative and definatory instances the character's "moral bent and intellect. The first is the way the person reacts to a situation and translates his reaction into action; the second is the way he thinks about himself and his situation" (17).<sup>111</sup> W.J. Harvey emphasizes decision-making, i.e., motivation, conflict and change, and action in terms of form, under the heading of "Time, Identity, Causality and Freedom" (22). John Bailey, finally, adds a variant by advocating as decisive factor of personality-creation a universal feeling, i.e., "love", which again forms and defines the "separate [...] uniqueness of our existence"

(36).<sup>112</sup> Harvey and Walcutt react negatively to the characters of twentieth-century novels because they are “unknowable” and thus “unsatisfactory” (346-47). For W.J. Harvey, in fact, the character portrayals in the novels of the nineteenth century are “far greater than their modern successors” (219). This line of thought could only diagnose “Character as a Lost Cause”, which is the title of a panel discussion in 1978. Mark Spilka notes that “[c]haracter has not been a viable critical concept for some time in novel study” (197).

## **7.2. The Historical View of the Essentialist Character: Modernism vs. Postmodernism**

The character-concepts that depend on intellect, morals, and responsible action, i.e., on forms of control, of course become unsatisfactory, when, in *modernism*, instead of psychic stability, “moral bent” and responsible action, psychic activity and desire, consciousness and awareness of the complexities of the world, i.e., the forces of the mind, come to be the yardsticks of personality. With the rise of the stream-of-consciousness novel (Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner, etc.),<sup>113</sup> the “spatial” elements of form, stability, invariable values (good *or* bad), rationality, and transparency, are replaced by temporal elements, movement and change, instantaneity and dependence on the moment, deferral and the ineffable, which, however, establish a new “spatial” concept, that of crossovers, simultaneity, possibility (of roles, chances, meanings), which engender the symbolic potential of the modern novel. The form-oriented, essentialist character-concept, however, is by no means suspended; it concentrates in the modern novel on the notions of identity, uniqueness, and authenticity. Yet it is infinitely complicated by the acknowledgment of the forces of consciousness, their extension “horizontally” in terms of stream and time and “vertically” in layers of consciousness and unconsciousness, the id, ego, and superego, and their struggle with one another, to use Freud’s notions. Consciousness as the framework of character is further complicated in modern narrative by the fact that interior processes are steered by and projected upon sensory perceptions. While the recognition of an intimate relationship between the self and the world of the senses leads to a widening of the concept of knowledge by emphasizing body consciousness, the concentration on consciousness, on the inner

world, generates an isolation of character from the forms of social order. Under the conditions set by the defamiliarization of the world and the alienation from society, the character's quest for meaning is primarily a forceful, self-powered quest for self-identity. Social identity no longer plays a decisive role. When morals, truths, and actions have become diffuse, priorities change, and this change of priorities calls forth new literary strategies that are able to discover and represent psychic energy and the forces of consciousness, of psychic and existential time, the moment of being or revelation, etc., while social problems are subordinated to psychological ones. A study of the new literary methods can convey the important insight that the combination of form and force acts as a "technique" of "discovery" (Schorer).

The postmodern novel deconstructs the modern, interiorized concept of character. With the dissolution of totalizing ideas like "reality", meaning, and the self, the modern psychological notions of identity and authenticity are relativized and transformed. The deconstruction of the self-centered character, however, is not only a postmodern affair. It starts with modern fiction — at the latest. It is a development that begins already in the nineteenth-century novel and is carried on in modernism. D.H. Lawrence writes with regard to his novel *The Rainbow* (1915): "it is the inhuman will, call it physiology, or like Marinetti — physiology of matter, that fascinates me. I don't so much care about what the woman *feels* [...] You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character" (198). Gertrude Stein turns against character and plot; she says that she intends "to begin to kill which is not dead, the nineteenth century which was so sure of evolution and prayer" (1974, 120). Virginia Woolf states in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" that "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (1966-67, 320).

These remarks do not indicate the deconstruction of character, but a change in the system of co-ordinates. The social bonds become secondary; the character turns self-referential and is set in the framework of universal forces. This development, however, does not lead to a stabilization of the self but to its ultimate decomposition, which, paradoxically, is the result of focusing the attention almost exclusively on the self, on the liberation of psychic force from social and moral form. On the one hand, the protagonists of modern texts are individualized by their consciousness of crisis



and disruption and by their quest for identity and wholeness, on the other, however, the characters, individualized by their existential crisis, disintegrate into desublimated desires, attitudes, aspects, and basic archetypal energies. Virginia Woolf demonstrates this contradiction: “I believe that all novels [...] deal with character [...] it is to express character [...] that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive has been evolved” (1966-67, 324). And then she notes: “characters are to be merely views; personality must be avoided at all costs” (1973, 60). Furthermore, the experience of an increasing complexity of life, of the explosive multiplication of information, the irreversible separation of the social sectors, of economy, social institutions, politics, and culture, in short, the recalcitrance of the outer world and its lack of rationality and humanity do not only cause a retreat from the outer world and a turn towards the subject, but also effect a loss of stable criteria for the assessment of character. The *aesthetic function* of the character, not its essence, now begins to step into the foreground. Again, Virginia Woolf writes, rather at a loss: “You see one thing in character, and I another. You say it means this, and I that. And when it comes to writing, each makes a further selection on principles of his own” (1966-67, 325). Yet the unlimited energy and power of the individual to resist, or rather, in the terms of Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, to “endure” guilt, estrangement, decenterment and threatening senselessness, still make the character a person.<sup>114</sup>

In postmodern fiction, character does not disappear; it in fact retains the potential that the traditional and modern narratives created for the self, even if the new fiction does not make the conventional or expected use of it. Elkin in an interview says about his fiction: “It is concerned with the self, but not with the events that occur to the self” (Ziegler and Bigsby 103). Barth has a number of pertinent things to say about postmodern fictional character. In a much-cited statement, he notes that “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities [in our case, the uniqueness of character] — [is] by no means necessarily a cause for despair”. As an example, he praises Borges, who “confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” — the intellectual dead end being plot and the authentic, essential self. Indeed, “it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature [...] even characterization! Even *plot!* — if one goes about

it the right way, aware of what one's predecessors have been up to" (1984, 69-70, 68). He says about his own mode of characterization: "those characters who don't actually dissolve by the end of the novel do indeed come through as characters should in a plot — if not an affirmation of themselves — then to a kind of integration of themselves", even though, of course, "what is integrated is not a person but a fictitious character" (Ziegler and Bigsby 38). In the "Perseid", Perseus's "problem is the mature sentient individual's usual problem in middle life, that is, to carry out the next development of a personality or a profession or a career" (Ziegler and Bigsby 29). In a discussion with John Hawkes, Barth refers to the obvious contrast between the former's theory of narrative and his narrative practice. He speaks reproachfully of Hawkes's "infamous obiter dictum that plot, character, setting, and theme are the natural enemies of fiction", and notes that he, Barth, finds his "novels to be dramaturgically whole", in other words, enriched with character and plot. Hawkes, excusing himself by his youth at the time of his statement, adds: "I will recant and say that plot [and one might add, "character"] is of course necessary, even though I cannot create a plot and still do not know what a plot is" (LeClair and McCaffery 14). Hawkes remarks in another statement: "I knew that the world of *The Cannibal* would be a configuration of unconscious life [...]; most of my fiction is a configuration of the unconscious" (Ziegler and Bigsby 172), a "quest into the unconscious" (184), though he is not concerned with what in modernism figures as the identity quest (for wholeness and authenticity): "I am not interested in the [...] quest and all of that" (182).

If the character is conceived as an individual in postmodern fiction, it is less known, less cognizant, more opaque to interpretation and understanding than were its forebears in modern fiction. It is enigmatic, with obsessive, traumatic, or paranoiac traits. Its psychic make-up would not fit Walcutt's and Harvey's terms for the establishment of character, for it is not predictable, is rather incoherent, fragmentary and contingent and refuses to move "forward" or to enter a process of orientation from appearance to essence, from a state of not-knowing towards enlightened truth, ethical demands, and an essential selfhood, a totalizing self. It is bound in the dialectic of self and *role*. In Barth's terms: "My 'mythic' characters carry on uneasy and precarious dialogues with

themselves, with their own pasts, with the roles that they assume and play or which are given them [... ;] these roles that never add up to oneself but certainly are not separate from oneself” (Ziegler and Bigsby 29). According to Barth, the “equilibria that we arrive at are always more or less unstable, and the equilibrium that one may re-arrive at or re-attain is also likely to be an uneasy, delicate, temporary equilibrium. In the language of systems analysis, their lives evolve from one unstable equilibrium to a new unstable equilibrium” (Ziegler and Bigsby 29). A character in postmodern fiction is subject to the force of time, is always differing from itself since the fixity of form, of identity, is endlessly deferred; the narrator’s or the character’s self-examination (if there can be such a thing) fails to consider and reveal what Walcutt calls “the moral and philosophical implications” (25) of feelings, reflections, motivations, decisions, actions (see also Guzowski). Growing zones of *uncertainty* appear instead, what Borges calls the “fundamental vagueness”: the impossibility of answering the vital questions about the self, of gaining more than fragmentary knowledge about causes and effects, origins and goals and the machinations of the world, the discernment, again in Borges’ words, that “there is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless” (*Ficciones* 19, 53). Elkin’s characters are “energized” by “the will” and by “irrational desire”. These characters have an immense power: “Each protagonist moves the other characters around as if they were pawns, or tries to”. What he likes about them is “the energy of ego” (LeClair and McCaffery 119-120).

The distinguishing features of the character do not, as in modernism, evolve from isolated problems of identity and authenticity of the self. The psychic state of the self is determined by the lack of balance between self and world, by fundamental uncertainty. When an individual character plays a role, the encroaching world plays a counter-role. The world is again an important partner of the self, not only as giver of impulses and a medium of projections or as milieu and a realm of causality and order, but also as something that is as opaque as the self, is the mysterious “other” and as such, together with the self, the cause of ontological uncertainty. Being enveloped in human ideas, concepts, and values that are seen by postmodernists to be fictions of the mind, the world “itself”, whatever that is, disappears in vagueness and

obscurity, and no longer offers an identity-promoting contact with a measurable, outer instance. The relations between the self and the world are directionless and do not contribute to a sense of clarity and (self) understanding. The communication between self and world fails in two different ways, depending on whether the characters are *outer-directed* or *inner-directed*. In the first case, they place their energies and efforts of self-understanding outside, within the world in which they act as indefatigable participants. They finally discover, however, the emptiness within (Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, *The Franchiser*, Nixon in Coover's *The Public Burning*), and they recognize that they lead a "life, deprived of all the warrants of personality" (282). In the other case, the characters are enclosed in the self and have difficulties of facing the world in terms of experience and feeling the impenetrable maskedness of the self in its communication with the world (Barth, *The End of the Road*, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, "Menelaïad"). In both cases there is a lack of mediation between, and unity of the within and the without.

Reflection of course turns both ways, ponders the inside and the outside, thinks about causes and achievements, reality and meaning. Kohler in Gass's *The Tunnel* notes: "We are embarrassed by experience. [...] Life suddenly becomes a dirty joke. A cause? a reason? What is not a cause?" (151) He "fail[s] to understand" (218), in fact "wonder[s] [...] if there's a real Real behind all this rigmarole" (422), and "can honestly say I have accomplished Nothing" (468). He feels "an emptiness" (349) in himself because "there was no world around our weary ears, only meaning; we were being stifled by significance" (343); he reflects on the role of a thinker: "were I a thinker of real thoughts, I think I would think only about the evanescent, and the character and condition of consciousness; because I know that is all I am" (467). He imagines an epitaph: "HERE LIES YOUNG ANONYMOUS KOHLER WHO DIED FROM A PROLONGED LACK OF REFERENCE" (371). Of course, thought and feeling combine in the experience of estrangement. The latter reaches a high point in paranoia. Its obsessions, especially in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, signify an extremely impaired relationship to the world and paradoxically mark both an enclosure within the self and a domination from outside by the System. Paranoia is a kind of postmodern depth-view of character; it is the postmodern version of the modern, split self. It

transfers the split ego-consciousness into the relation between the self and the world. Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* is initially motivated in her perception of the world by her dissatisfaction with the mere surface quality of her social life; she looks for the better Other in her search for the Tristero, the underground communication system, but her failure to attain certainty in her outward moves reflects back into the inner state of her psyche that vacillates between the feeling of soundness and madness, surface and depth.

The epistemological search for personal and universal truth is countered by the general ontological uncertainty about the condition of the world. It is no longer the question of “who am I” that has to be answered but above all the question of “what is the world like that I am placed in”. Both self and world are constitutionally opaque. Of all postmodern novels, Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, together with Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, are the most sustained expressions of the new uncertainty in psychic terms. Under the weight of the experienced ambivalences and uncertainties of the world, the contrasts between falseness and genuineness, seeming and being, indeed mask and ego lose their clear-cut contours; the consciousness of the self turns opaque, becomes a mystery to itself. In *The Recognitions*, Hannah says of Herschel: “Dissociated personality [...] He’s not sure who he is any more, whether he is anyone at all for that matter. That’s why he wants a tattoo, of course. Simply a matter of ego-identification” (*Rec* 181). At the end of the book, Stanley, one of the two genuine artist-figures, recognizes inner “conflicts he did not yet understand” and poses “questions he could not answer now, and he sensed, might never” (951). Esme, a main female character, is afraid of “close scrutiny [...] someone from outside might discover something in her she did not know about herself” (270). She muses about the relation between name and self: “How were they all so certain? calling her ‘Esme’: they knew she was *Esme* when she did not know, who she was or who Esme, if both were the same, every moment, when they were there, or when she was alone, both she” (276). She tries to commit suicide. In this book, the question of identity is obfuscated by the dialectic of feeling (anxiety, bewilderment) and knowing, an opposition that allows for no synthesis, and by the superimposition of layers of consciousness, of perception, feeling, desire and reflection, which do not combine into unity but act against one another, producing confusion. Self-

expression is here a parody of self-expression. The truth is beyond grasp: "When people tell a truth they do not understand what they mean, they say it by accident, it goes through them and they do not recognize it" (481). Being unable to find in his father the source of understanding and help that he needs, Wyatt, the artist-protagonist of the book, cries out in utter pain: "*No one knows who I am*" (468) — including himself.

The problem that postmodern fiction faces is the tension between the *idea* of the authentic self and the lack of its realization, a dialectic of idea and actualizability that is reminiscent of romanticism but remains without the possibility of synthesis. This dialectic is important for postmodern fiction because even if the character, for whatever reason, is disintegrated, the idea of character may and will remain intact and present. A reference to the Marxist theory of character, the belief that character is the "effect" and the mirror of the social "system" (Lukács, Jameson, *Political Unconscious*) may here clarify the issue of character. According to the Marxist mirror theory the character in postmodern narrative would be the result of postmodern social and cultural conditions. For the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, the postmodern subject is a "dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion" (1984, 71).<sup>115</sup> This is a bird's-eye view that displays a number of weaknesses. It ignores in its one-dimensionality the constitutional tension between idea and reality or realizability, here of the unique, centered character that Eagleton gives universal validity; this stance furthermore neglects the historical circumstances that determine the ideal of character and its conditioning by time and social change. The Marxist view here approaches the essentialist, moral notions of Harvey and Walcutt. Eagleton presupposes, without expressing any doubt or hesitation, the factual existence in the past, or rather, the possibility in the future, of the self-determined, unique, and psychologically coherent self that he makes his rule of measurement for social criticism, though such a self is and always has been a fiction.

Yet again, this counter-argument against the theoretical view is too one-dimensional because the opposition of reality and fiction is not clear-cut. The separation of idea and reality does in fact not say

anything about the reality of the ideal or idea of character since there is a mental reality that is as real, or even more so, than a factual reality. Though the construct of a socially responsible and self-fulfilling self has come to be seen as an ideological construct that never existed as a factual reality, this does not mean that the *idea* of such an undispersed centered self, of a free person, does not have the reality of desire, emotion, and thought, or cannot initiate the desire for its substantiation. The realizability of the ideal of character may be an illusion, and, as far as this idea of character is bound to its realizability, it may be an illusion, too. But it is quite real in its *function* as a signpost that shows the direction for improvement. It has functioned socially as an image of personality that has provided a humanist sense of reality and of character and helped structure human intellectual and practical life — at least in Western countries.

Yet another objection may arise, not against the realizability of a full-fledged centered character but its *desirability*. Its usefulness may be doubted because at this late date there is less confidence in rationality, stability, and centeredness. Even if the humanist idea of a self-reliant and responsible character is rightly seen as a great achievement that empowered the striving for freedom and social rights, it may now be time to have certain reservations about this model of a “round” character. The desired, in fact demanded orientation towards the role-model of a centered, self-determined, full-fledged self may be regarded not only as a chance for the character but also criticized as a repressive influence that forces a specific model of behavior and thought on everybody and causes neurosis and guilt, and even impedes social integration when a character does not live up to the demands of the model (or, for that matter, concentrates itself entirely on the enhancement of the self). And finally, the unique self with a depth-core may be considered not only as fiction or as a trauma, but quite practically as a hindrance in the first place, a restriction of the energy-flow, a confinement of the self and a curtailment of its chances of extension, in a horizontal direction of metamorphosis and transformation. The “reduction” of the self, the abandonment of its essence, its core, then do not only appear under negative aspects but also as the chance of openness, flexibility, and adaptability. The de-centered self, which Foucault and the other poststructuralists see as the basis of “nomadism” and of multiple subject-formations, allows various roles to be played and

strategies of resistance to be developed, resistance against the fixed totalizations of church, state, and tradition.

Though all these ideas and deliberations, and their tensions and contradictions, are external to the text, they influence author, text, and reader as pre-understandings of character, pre-interpretations that cannot be deleted but at most allow for choices, combinations, and montage-strategies, for foreground-background, presence-absence constellations. This multi-dimensionality of character makes for complexity. The reductions of the character to a “subject” and of the subject to the autonomous “voice” of the text and of the voice of the text to a mere language figuration, turn character into a composite affair; in the background, all the ideas, models, and tensions of character wait for re-entry and are actually always there as possible frames of reference. This presence-absence constellation makes it necessary for the critic to include them in his reflections on the text, if not as actualities, then as virtualities.

### **7.3. Structuralism, the Decentering of Character, and the Creation of the Subject**

The character cannot be abolished in narration, whatever its deconstruction and deformation, since it is one of the constituents of the narrated situation, which is the constituent of narrative, which is the situational transformation of meaning (or the denial of meaning). Under these circumstances, the character, even if it is not self-present and is portrayed in its “radical excentricity to itself” (Lacan 1977, 171); i.e., even if it has no essence, it still has always its *function*, like the other elements of space, time, action/event. Function is stressed by structuralist criticism that transgresses the identity-principle towards an effectual negation of the self. For the structuralists, essence, like mimesis, is a mere convention, an illusion in view of the mental constructedness and linguistic generation of character. They describe and analyze narrative in terms of relations and oppositions, of deep structure and surface structure (Greimas, Barthes, Todorov, and others). In the deep structure, according to Greimas’s narratological models, there are no characters but only analytical abstractions, “actants”, narrative functions, which have modal roles. They perform strategic functions in the plot as sender, receiver, subject or object, helper or opponent, partly in analogy to



the linguistic relation subject-verb-object.<sup>116</sup> By the distribution of thematic roles, the actants are transformed into actors in the surface structure of the individual text. This concept of character that more or less exclusively emphasizes action does not pay attention to mental activity, reflection, emotion, and introspection, and leaves out temporal aspects like development and surprise. It is again a “*spatial*” concept working with fixed positions and relations. In a further move, Roland Barthes revises his viewpoint and remarks that for a theory of narration a system that orients itself exclusively by the plot is not satisfactory, and he suggests in an analysis of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” a “semic” code composed of “qualities” for the definition of character.

Either way, what remains is a reduced and abstracted character, a skeletted subject, a subject that does not grow “organically” into a round self but is the static product of *montage*, serving outside functions. Culler remarks that “character is the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid least attention and has been least successful in treating” (1976, 230), and Barthes notes that the character in all structuralist models behaves itself more like a participant than as an “essence”. Depth is replaced by depthlessness. When with the structuralist model, deep and surface levels of character become separable, and when the deep view finally is discredited, the montage-principle can do two things. It can play with the surface-depth dichotomy, for, even if the depth view is no longer validated, it always remains a given, an anthropological constant, a valid idea also “under erasure”. Or montage can concentrate on the surface and create out of fragments a performing subject; or montage can do both. That is what Barthelme does in *Snow White*, where he makes use of the opposition between the traditional/heroic and modern psychological depth views but concentrates on the new depthlessness and employs irony, play, parody and the comic mode for manipulation of all positions. He combines the new psychological uncertainty and the new depthlessness into a strategy of playful deconstruction. When the heroine’s emotions and thoughts are revealed to the dwarfs or the reader, they are mystified or disjointed and fragmented to such an extent that they make no sense (31, 165-66), in fact appear as mere surface, under which, however, a hidden depth looms. Popular psychological models are introduced to explore and explain the unknown depth of her personality, yet they are only

used to be satirized. Punctiliously speaking of “*The Psychology of Snow White*”, the narrator muses:

What does she hope for? ‘Someday my prince will come.’ By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will ‘complete’ her. That is, she lives her own being as ‘not-with’ [...] The incompleteness is an ache capable of subduing all other data presented by consciousness. I don’t go along with those theories of historical necessity, which suggest that her actions are dictated by ‘forces’ outside of the individual. That doesn’t sound reasonable, in this case (70).

Playing with the traditional character-concepts, the montage-principle can also exclusively concentrate on the surface and still use as horizon the more complicated views of character. The mode of composition in the extreme case of montage is the list, the list of unrelated items that do not interrelate to form a coherent character. This kind of list makes use of the notion that the character is just the collector, the meeting point of qualities, actions, and situations but parodies this idea at the same time by radicalizing the incongruity of the listed details. It thus both uses and ironizes the psychological practice of collecting qualities, habits, deeds, and achievements in order to define the (in fact indefinable) individuality of a character, its uniqueness and depth core. In Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, the writer Lamont quotes from his short story “O’Mara of No Fixed Abode”. He refers to “the kernel, the nucleus”, i.e., the characterization of the protagonist O’Mara. It is a long list of what O’Mara likes and dislikes, running over more than nine pages in a parodic style, dispersing, disseminating, and fragmenting any kind of sense in a combination of structuralist and poststructuralist viewpoints. Language’s additive composition, the lists of incoherent, incongruent, irrelevant details, together with the disruption of syntax, overwhelm the targeted subject, which disappears in mere verbiage:

He was wont to have an accident over a girl that men’s forget, lingering awhile, being on the mall and swingin’ down the lane, wild flowers, Charley his boy, fascinating rhythm, a June night, his best girl, his dream girl, his Katharina, a lonesome babe lost in the wood, the winks of a angel, a rhapsody in blue, a serenade post-orangeade, tea for two, a love that’s true always, a cuppa coffee (jive java, Jim!), a sangwich and her, Dinah, drifting and dreaming, a Swiss miss who missed him, sitting on top of the world, and moonlight and roses (67).

Based on the uncertainty of the self about itself that we discussed above, the montage-principle can add time to the surface-view and/or arrange a simultaneity of surface possibilities in its creation of character. The result is the *multiplication* of the self. For Foucault and Deleuze, the answer to the question of “[w]ho speaks and acts?” is: “It is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts” (Foucault and Deleuze 206). Character is in fact understood as a manifold virtuality out of which emerges the singular actuality, which is always in motion. Already in 1931, Beckett spoke of Proust’s “perpetual exfoliation of personality” (13). Barth notes in a statement: “I’ve always been impressed by the multiplicity of people that one has in one [...] I’ve never been impressed by any unity of identity in myself” (Prince 56). Sukenick emphasizes the fact “that you are amorphous; you are just a locus of consciousness and operating possibly on one possible ego structure. And when you see that there are all sorts of possibilities”. And he adds: “Now for me the liberating thing is to choose not from the social or from some catalog but to allow all the possibilities in your personality” (Bellamy 1974, 63-64). Multiplicity creates new possibilities even out of that which has seemingly been exhausted. The relation and the tensions between virtuality and actuality of character intensify the problem of representation, of representation of the subject, and more so of the self, and infers the impossibility of representing the multiplied character as a stable, coherent entity.

The character, which is placed between worlds and multiplied, is almost always off center and leaves gaps; it is mystified, is clichéd and ironized, or is simply given up. This kind of non-characterization of characters ends up foregrounding the *situation*. Having lost its anthropocentrism, the situation paradoxically becomes itself a decentered “center” that deconstructs and reconstructs itself and its constituents in an infinite number of transformations. Ronald Sukenick has noted that, “as the field becomes organized, the shaping influence of personality, and of any other single element, becomes less and less until finally it is the structured field itself that becomes the organizing power, shaping personality, shaping energy, shaping language, culture, literary tradition” (1985, 14). In this process of organizing “the structured field” of the situation, the montage-principle does not, however, stop at the multiplication of selves. Once the force of character and

situation are balanced, or once the situation gains dominance and the character reduced to a mere functionary, the *mental activities* of the character can also be isolated and combined at will. The dissolution of the psychological and the narratological deep structure, the decenterment of character, and the emphasis on function instead of essence enforce, in a further step, the concentration on the characters' function in *creating* the world. This means that the character's faculties or mental activities are foregrounded and used for relating to the world, or, conversely, on the perceptive modes that determine the world as it is created, quite independent of a unified character as form, as individual source or cause. The narrated situation then becomes the playing-field for the manifold forces of perception, desire, feeling, thinking and acting. Sukenick says: "The whole consciousness breaks up into parts, and various energies can begin to flow because of that polarizing among the parts. The fragmentation can then alter the parts, or the parts can be combined into different ways. [...] that willful fragmentation of the ongoing narrative — or of the ongoing experience of a given consciousness in the process of composition — creates energy, creates detail. [...] You begin to realize that the process of characterization is the process of fragmentation and dialectic that the mind ordinarily pursues" (LeClair and McCaffery 295). This fragmentation allows for a *dissociation* of character and *consciousness*, of character and *action* (while critics like Harvey or Walcutt see character and action as moral unity), and character and *experience*, without, however, giving fully up the idea of a centered, unique, self-reflexive character that looms behind, behind, for instance, the character-reified-to-voice, Menelaus, in Barth's "Menelaiad", not to speak of Beckett's *Unnamable*, the prototype of postmodern reductions of character, whose existentialism, however, is more ironized, comicalized, and played with in postmodern fiction than Beckett probably would have approved of.

#### **7.4. Poststructuralism, the Deconstruction of the Subject, and the Introduction of Time**

The structuralist approach models itself on linguistics and turns against the individual character (which is expropriated and replaced as origin of fictional character by language and narrative

text), as well as against the theory of representation in favor of the “true text”, the “formal truth” (Ricardou),<sup>117</sup> but it retains in narrative a skeletted subject as point of reference or label for the collection of actions or qualities. The *poststructuralist* approach (of writers like Derrida, Lacan, Foucault) further deconstructs the subject, which structuralism had kept intact at least as idea, by emphasizing social sign-systems, language, and simply the process of change. The deductive, fixed (“spatial”) structure of character and the subject as integrative instance are replaced by the inductive, unfixed, temporal, and infinite *process* that is perpetually in construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, is contradictory, open to change, and adverse to any kind of closure (which the idea of a psychologically centered character and of a narrative deep structure of character would suggest). Lacan has said: “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier. [...] The consequence is the fading of the subject” (1981, 207-08). The consequence of the rejection of all kinds of totalizations in favor of multiplicity, change and continuously new configurations of the human is that the character can no longer be represented as centered. In Foucault’s words: “Representation no longer exists; there’s only action — theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks” (Foucault and Deleuze 206-07). This is not quite a new development. Nietzsche already wrote: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming: the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything” (1967, 45). The “one possible ego structure”, of which Sukenick speaks in the quotation cited above, and in which all ego versions originate and connect, can be given up in favor of a mere serial succession of character versions that may change, metamorphose, alter their age and gender without interrelation or recognizable reference to a recognizable and “probable” common self. Available are now two strategies of decenterment: (1) a multiplication of egos without the necessity of a narrative interrelation of the various versions in one unique self; and (2) a fragmentation and remontage of fragments of one self. The two strategies connect, and postmodern writers take account of them in various forms and combinations.

Yet if there is no centered character left, then there is need at least for a *subject*. Without a (formal) subject, the narrated situation does not function. Character is one of its constituents, even when it is

deconstructed; it so to speak reconstructs itself automatically. But it can reconstruct itself under the dominance of form or force. Postmodern fiction, and the postmodern theories that accompany and influence it, of course emphasize force, force as a secondary phenomenon, resisting power, or force as a primary phenomenon relativizing all categorical restrictions. Foucault's elaboration of his position may here serve as a guide-line, because he deconstructs and reconstructs the subject, sets it in a field of functions defined within a system of power and resistance basic to postmodern fiction.<sup>118</sup> The Foucauldian subject is dispersed:

To the various statuses, the various sites, the various positions that he can occupy or be given when making a discourse. To the discontinuity of the planes from which he speaks. And if these planes are linked by a system of relations, this system is not established by the synthetic activity of a consciousness identical with itself, dumb and anterior to all speech, but by the specificity of a discursive practice [...] thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority, in which a network of distinct sites is deployed (1972, 54-55).

Yet this is not all. In "What is an Author?" Foucault sees the subject as a "function of discourse"; he assigns it the role of a necessary, though de-essentialized frame of reference:

The subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its interventions in discourse, and its system of dependencies [...] We should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse (137-38).

And a further point must be made. If the text is a network of power, its "abstract machine", there must be subjects that exercise, and others that suffer this power; indeed, "one doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it

is exercised” (Foucault 1980, 156). Power always calls up *resistance*. Actually, power could not exist without resistance; it is defined by its counterpart, resistance. Therefore, in spite of his conception of power as an “abstract machine”, to which everybody is subjected, Foucault sees and advocates strategies of resistance, which, of course, let the character, as a kind of self, back in through the backdoor. His advice to the de-individualized, yet still resisting character is:

Develop action, thought and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization. Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple differences over uniformity, flows over unity, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic [...]

Do not demand of politics that it restore the “rights” of the individual, as philosophy defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to “de-individualize” by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combination. The groups must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of “de-individualization” (1977, xiii-xiv).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *The Anti-Oedipus* take an alternative course, making resistance not a secondary phenomenon, a response to the power games of the “abstract machine”, but, following and deconstructing Freud, consider it a primary force that relativizes, and rebels against, the social system and its repressive tendency. They place this power of resistance, or rather, deconstruction, in the primordial, nomadic and mechanistic flux of *desire* propelled by an “energy-machine” (1), which, however, is coded and territorialized by capitalism. De-territorialized desire, following the “lines of flight”, in a process of “becoming”, towards unknown, experimental states, deconstructs the repressive fixities and inhibitions of the self, the self-identical ego, and disrupts social formations and bourgeois order and their “semiotic regimes”, with which it is in continuous, conflictual tension. Arguing in an ironic turn from the social viewpoint of order and defining the basic, uninhibited, primordial flux of deconstructive desire as “illness”, the authors call the subject (“with no fixed identity”) that resists the normative but artificial claims of society a “schizo”, who is, so to speak, pure, deterritorialized force, as much as that is possible.

As for the Schizo, continually wandering about, migrating here, there, and everywhere as best he can, he plunges further and further into the realm of deterritorialization, reaching the furthest limits of the decomposition of the socius on the surface of his own body without organs (35).

In a reversal of anthropocentric thought, the ego does not take center place but rather the “desiring machines” and “energy machines” do. Any assemblage of incongruence and heterogeneity makes desire and energy flow, and dissolves the systems of repression that support, for their own restrictive purposes, the idea, or rather illusion, of an individual, self-controlled subject. Deleuze and Guattari differ from Foucault in the answer to the question of whether stratified power or unstratified desires is primary. They themselves comment on their difference to Foucault, noting that contrary to the latter, “(1) to us the assemblages seem fundamentally to be assemblages not of power but of desire (desire is always assembled), and power seems to be a stratified dimension of the assemblage; (2) the diagram and abstract machine have lines of flight that are primary, which are not phenomena of resistance or counterattack in an assemblage, but cutting edges of creation and deterritorialization” (*Plateaus*, 1993, 531). These two concepts — Foucault’s and Deleuze/ Guattari’s — stake out the range of possibilities on a scale that allows for many transitions and conflictual oppositions but leaves the subject in a tenuous position. It is needed and dissolved: needed as a site where the forces of power, desire and discourse meet, dissolved as source and cause of what is generated in the text. Ideas of character outside the text are no longer accepted as the source of character-figurations within the text, and the subject in the text is no longer the source of language, of its system and textual performance. They are, on the contrary, the bonds that shape the character. If one takes the radical linguistic position to its extreme, which only few postmodern writers do in practice, though for provocative purposes they may talk differently in theory, then subject and subjectivity merge in the subjectivity of the discourse and its linguistic form as syntagma of signifiers that have no reference beyond language and find their frame of reference alone in the linguistic system (Genette 1993, 63).

Postmodern writers have taken up the poststructuralist deconstructive ideas that in many ways form the ideology of postmodernism and its culture of difference, immanence, and multi-



plicity, of indefiniteness and mobility of being, and the heterogeneity of the “performing self”, to quote the title of Richard Poirier’s book. The following statements of postmodern writers show that they speak in unison though with interesting variations, often in a mixture of structuralist “spatial” and poststructuralist “temporal” positions, which both neglect or deny individuality as central aspect of character. Borges in an interview of 1971 says: “I’m afraid there are no characters in my work. I’m afraid *I’m* the only character” (Newman and Kinzie, *Borges*, 399). Robbe-Grillet, just as Borges, writes in general terms: “the novel of characters belongs entirely to the past, it describes a period; that which marked the apogee of the individual”; yet “the old myths of ‘depth’” (1966, 28, 23) have become useless for describing the current human condition. Later postmodern writers elaborate their position(s) in deconstructionist terms. Sukenick declares in an interview that “[m]y drive is to dissolve character. I think that that’s not only a need on my part, but I presume to think that’s also a cultural need for a lot of people, for the culture in general perhaps” (Bellamy 1974, 64). He calls the characters’ names the only stable elements, which, however, serve merely as “rubrics for totally disparate traits” (Bellamy 1972b, 65). And he writes in *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction*: “My characters have some very basic minimal identity, but beyond that the changes they go through are enormous, even contradictory. I prefer the characters to be as little consistent with themselves as they can be, so that everything but that tiny, perhaps genetic, trace of identity is cancelled out” (133). The evanescent characters in his novel *Out* disintegrate, transform, and metamorphose into one another. Age and relationships are perpetually open to change, bound to movement, to the flight from stasis. Sukenick writes in *Out*: “I want to write a book like a cloud that changes as it goes” (136), which directly relates to the composition of character. Federman utters a similar opinion: “the people of fiction, the fictitious beings, will also no longer be well-made characters who carry with them a filed identity, a stable set of social and psychological attributes [...] The creatures of the new fiction will be as changeable, as illusory, as nameless, as unnamable as fraudulent, as unpredictable as the discourse that makes them up [...] That creature will be, in a sense, present to his own making, present to his own absence” (1975, 12-13). In *Take It or Leave It*, he writes: “I want to tell a story that

cancels itself as it goes” (n.p.); and it cancels with the story of course the characters. The character participates in the fiction only as a “grammatological being” (1975, 13). Gass notes, referring to Mr. Cashmore in Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*, that a character is “mostly empty canvas”, a “verbal body”, is “(1) a noise, (2) a proper name, (3) a complex system of ideas, (4) a controlling conception, (5) an instrument of verbal organization, (6) a pretended mode of referring, and (7) a source of verbal energy”. He adds: “Mr. Cashmore is not a person. He is not an object of perception, and nothing whatever that is appropriate to persons can be correctly said of him” (1970, 45, 44).<sup>119</sup> For Gass’s language-is-the-world concept, “there are two kinds of characters: characters as sources from which the language comes, and aims or ends towards which the language flows. Sometimes they turn out to be the same” (Ziegler and Bigsby 155). If the fictional character is merely a “verbal body” — a “linguistic location in a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier. Just as the subject of a sentence, say, is modified by the predicate” (LeClair and McCaffery 28)— it only follows that Gass in *Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife* imagines as protagonist a Lady Language in person who creates herself with a wide variety of styles, fearing nothing more than what she calls “the terror of terminology” (n.p., blue section). The effect is that “the lonesome self [is] losing and recreating itself in language, the prisonhouse turning itself into the playhouse before our very eyes” (Tanner 1975, 121).

It is obvious that the postmodern writers in the wake of both structuralism and poststructuralism recur to the “natural” frame of fiction and its elements of time and space, for new paradigms, in the attempt to define or rather de-define character. As mentioned, structuralism fixes characters as “*spatial*” positions for the collection and distribution of actions and qualities; poststructuralism dissolves character in a *temporal* process. It is this temporal feature that ultimately wins out in the self-understanding of postmodern fiction. One of the reasons for this development is that time is change, dissolution of the old and constitution of the new, a continuous deferral of the end, of closure, and that it is renewing *force* in contrast to stabilizing order and form; the support of energy and movement makes sense, since the “effort at control is hopeless” anyway (LeClair and McCaffery 287). The advantage of the process

of force in time furthermore has an advantage over stability and center in “space” in that it can be interpreted in various ways, on different levels, and as a move of crosscurrents, not only sequentially as change. It can be understood in musical terms as *rhythm*, or in linguistic terms as *discourse*, for which character is the transit station. Among postmodern writers, Peter Currie sees — in terms of Foucault — “a recognition of subjectivity as the trace of plural and intersecting discourses, of non-unified, contradictory ideologies, the product of a relational system which is finally that of discourse itself” (64); Hans Bertens interprets the character’s discontinuity and contingency (in a Derridean sense) as the arbitrary replacement “at any time” of one discourse “by another type of discourse”, so that “discourses seem to be floating into and out of certain fictional structures that are endowed with proper names” (1988a, 148-49). Whether one retains the notion of character or not, the concepts of order, uniqueness, and wholeness are dissolved in favor of dynamis and change. The psychic force appears as *desire*, privileged by Deleuze and Guattari (and discussed later), or as *consciousness*, which includes the flow of experience, self-consciousness, and language, or as specified or unspecified *voice*, voice as “freedom of the language”, as that which “differs”, which “has to do with flows and desires, not with meaning”, and belongs to “signification nascent, floating”. It is a performance of consciousness, yet of course within the “system of signifiers” (Durand 1997, 100-01). Sukenick speaks of *consciousness*:

What goes on beneath the ordinary idea of characterization — having characters interact and conflict within a fictional world — is really not very unlike the ordinary process of the mind in any inquiry about anything. In this case, instead of the entities being concepts, ideas, symbols, points of view, they are called Frank, Mary, and Larry. In both cases, the entities involved combine, recombine, split up. [...] More and more as the idea of imitation drops away, the necessity of having these entities under the label of hard-and-fast, well-rounded characters also drops away (LeClair and McCaffery 295).

Federman again emphasizes (the flow of) consciousness: “In a number of recent novels it seems that the consciousness is becoming more prominent, while the self is gradually diminishing” (LeClair and McCaffery 140-41). We “are going to have much more *consciousness*, much more *reflexiveness* (in the sense of thinking),

much more awareness in the novel” (141). However, he varies the viewpoints and the terms he uses. In addition to consciousness, Federman speaks of discourse and rhythm (“I am looking for [...] the rhythm of the entire book” [129]), or of *voice*.

In his interview with Federman, McCaffery notes: “In all of your fiction — but especially in *The Voice in the Closet* — you deliberately blur the usual distinctions between narrator, author, and voice”, and he attributes this tendency to “a great deal of postmodern fiction: the works of Sukenick, Gass, Katz, Barth, even Vonnegut” (135- 36). Voice becomes one the most inclusive terms for the textual process because it “speaks of the body: of its dualities (interior/exterior, front/ back, eye/ear, etc.). It speaks of the unconscious drives and fantasies” (Durand 1997, 101). It is thus an expression of force, comprising the “voices” of author, character and language in one uncontrollable intentionality. Its incomprehensibility in terms of order and form places it beyond all-too rational control and gives it multi-dimensionality (Sukenick: “I don’t think the model is now control” [287]). Federman confirms McCaffery’s assumption that the “narrative voice” in *The Voice in the Closet* “is not really you so much, or a ‘character’ in the usual sense, but is actually the voice of all your earlier fiction”. In Federman’s words: “Exactly. It’s the voice of fiction, the voice of all of Federman’s fiction — everything in our lives is fiction, as I mentioned earlier” (146); and he adds later that, beginning a novel, “I have no idea where I’m going. No idea whatsoever. Otherwise what would be the point of writing?” (131). The voice of fiction takes hold of itself. It is a view that Sukenick shares, at least for a time.

With the negation of the reference to the extra-linguistic world, and the rejection of the distinctive individuality of the character in the text, with its replacement by the subject, and the replacement of the subject by desire, subjectivity, and consciousness, by voice, language and its signifiers, the other extreme has been reached, and one might wonder if the intention is not “to chase away the ‘ideology of representation’ only to replace it with what could be called an idealism of the signifier” (Carroll 1982, 18). The consequence of an understanding of fiction as mere force, as temporal flow (of consciousness, narrative voice, or language) without form is finally that “[as] a matter of fact, there is then no longer even a narrator. [...] No one speaks here; the events seem to narrate

themselves” (Benveniste, *Problems* 208), which of course goes against the grain of narrative. Modernism’s “stream-of-consciousness” ideology has here been carried to its limit; the idea of the stream is radicalized to the detriment of the subject. If we look for a term that incorporates most aspects of the dissolution of the self and of its substitute, the subject, and thus includes the different (traditional, modernist, structuralist and poststructuralist) versions of character, one of the best choices might be the term subjectivity or “subjective presence”. It indicates the subject as focal point, the subject as author, character or text, and its voice, the performance in time of mental activities, and the uncategorizability of that activity, as well as the shifting temporality of the particular and distinctive textual process. Charles Russell gives a comprehensive summary. We recognize “on both the formal and thematic levels [...] the problematic nature of subjective presence — whether conceived in terms of character, writer or the speaking voice of the text — a subjectivity which rarely achieves clear definition or stable identity. Personal presence discovers itself as fundamentally in flux, as a process or transitory locus of shifting, disparate and incompletely known events, forces, concepts and systems, over which it has little control and which it can at most investigate and strive to pattern by a constant self-reflexive critique and creation” (1980, 30).

If force and its various representations become dominant in postmodern fiction, there are also counter-movements seeking a new balance between force and form. Interestingly enough, though Sukenick used to employ the term “improvisation” for his narrative method, he came to feel a lack of structure and then complemented the idea of improvisation with the necessity of having form (“I needed a formal structure” [LeClair and McCaffery 291]). The reason is that improvisation by now has also become a worn-out formula, a cliché. Elkin follows suit: “If a book has nothing but those spontaneous generations, the result will not be melodrama but chaos”. And he adds: “As a matter of fact I *am* concerned with structure and form and my novels *are* structured and formed” (LeClair and McCaffery 116, 113). Barth says: “I worry myself sick. I take the structure pretty seriously” (Dembo and Pondrom 22), and he calls himself “passionately formal” (LeClair and McCaffery 17). Coover emphasizes the “formal design” of his *The Origin of the Brunists* and the “design, the structure [...] so self-revealing” in *The*

*Universal Baseball Association* (LeClair and McCaffery 71), and he speaks of his “delight with the rich ironic possibilities that the use of structure affords” (Gado 148). Federman notes that though he does not write plots, he seeks in the “sentence” he begins his book with and the central image “the structure, the rhythm of the entire book”, a strategy that leads to symbolism and makes a book like *The Twofold Vibration* “rigidly structured” (LeClair and McCaffery 129). Hawkes, as Barth (and the others), wants to have it both ways: “my own writing process involves a constant effort to shape and control my materials as well as an effort to liberate fictional energy” (Dembo and Pondrom 10). Gass gives an idea of what this new form is like. It is the force of simultaneity, of possibility: “Rigor is achieved by pushing things very hard and trying to uncover every possible ramification, nuance, and aspect, and then ordering those things very, very carefully” (LeClair and McCaffery 157). What Gass appreciates in Barth is “energy and total control”; and he finds in Hawkes, Elkin, Gaddis, Barthelme, not to speak of Beckett and Borges, “[c]ontrol again” (LeClair and McCaffery 173-74). Form can be elicited from the flow of narrative, and it can be imposed on it (which may be the same thing, since form is a human construct, a case for montage, anyway). Sukenick claims for Federman, Abish, Calvino, and himself: “you simply impose a form on your materials, it not really mattering how this form was generated [...] the important idea is that the *genesis of form* isn’t important, whether it’s traditional or untraditional. The important thing is to have a form” (LeClair and McCaffery 291).

What these utterances demonstrate is the strained, contingent, and yet necessary and variable, interrelation between force and form in narratives as well as in character; they indicate that character is always placed between force and form, also postmodern character. The “new paradigms” of characterization that, Sukenick says, “the new circumstances [...] demand” (LeClair and McCaffery 287) are obviously meant to emphasize force, textuality, and discourse. But they have their source in human constants, desire and consciousness, and manifest themselves in *forms* and *patterns* of perception and reflection, behavior and action, of conflict and struggle, winning and losing, joy and despair, which create the doubleness of character we spoke of before, the doubleness of, and tension between, textuality and referentiality. The stream of

discourse, of consciousness and voice, the “subjective presence” are directed to, or originate from, and indeed are split up into, manifestations of agents, and the agents again are split up into the inner and the outer, the inner again into contrasting convictions, feelings, reflections, and doings, the outer into places, things and other people. This creates *difference*, not only “différance” (Derrida), i.e., deferral and dissemination of signification, and constitutes the stable, *situational* condition of narrative in all instability and fluidity. And the stable, situational condition of fiction is also the precondition for the meeting and interaction of the intratextual and the extratextual dimensions in the work of art.

The tension between the textual and the extratextual is repeated within the narrated situation in the strain between the actual and the possible. The character is constitutionally mobile and moves in the text between the various levels of narrative, is potentially everything, referential and nonreferential, arrested in its being, but also “fluid” and multiple, definable as function and indefinable as being. This is the point where the poststructuralist positions, accentuating mobility, textual fluidity and unstructurable flow, connect with the new psychological uncertainty that recognizes the opacity and unknowability of the self, not only to others but also to the own self. We ask, in Foucault’s terms, “under what conditions and through what forms [...] an entity like the subject [can] appear in the order of discourse” and “what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit” (1976, 243). Gilbert Sorrentino’s novel *Mulligan Stew* is a pertinent text for demonstrating how play, irony, and the comic mode make use of various models of character and the tensions between them. *Mulligan Stew* is more radical than most other experimental narratives in making the subject a fluid entity and the result of discourse, a word figure, while at the same time equipping the character with all the properties of an extratextual being that, however, never can leave its textual confinement.

## 7.5. Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*: The Connection and Clash of Character Concepts

*Mulligan Stew* dramatizes the (insurmountable) tension between the self-creating force of the text and the control of the author, between the author and the “They” system that controls him, as well as the tension between the textuality and the referentiality of the fictional characters within the written text. The writer/protagonist, Tony Lamont, who is working on a new novel, tentatively called *Guinea Red*, leaves his fictional characters the freedom to claim an existence outside the novel and to discuss their roles within the text. They complain about Lamont’s bad writing, which they are horrified by and wish to escape from, but which they have to succumb to since they are slaves to the written word whenever Lamont is working on them. In Halpin’s, one of his character’s, words: “Were there a God I would beg Him to tell me why he allowed this *scribbler*, this unbearably pretentious *hack*, Anthony Lamont, to place me in this ridiculous position” (25). Since Lamont, however, loves flashbacks, he “loses control over our ‘present’ substances, re-creating us, as he does, in the past” (150). Left alone in the present and without defined physical appearance, “since he [Lamont] never bothered to describe us” (151), the characters even decide to deceive their author by exchanging roles. Lamont on the other hand, is himself at times overwhelmed by the force of the written words. He feels out of control: “I don’t even know where the *title* came from. Let alone anything else! There is no way for me to judge this [...] I don’t think I am in *control* here. I didn’t want *this* to be Daisy” (246-47). He doubts his own independence, his self-determination as an author, fearing that “as *I* have created Halpin — such as he, my God, is — *somebody* has created me” (247). He has “begun to feel like a character myself” (257). When his paranoia drives him to madness, he thinks that “they” have plotted against him all the while. Just as character (Halpin) and text are alienated from one another, the controlling author and the self-creating text are disengaged, leaving Lamont in a paranoiac state, terrified of the coercions of a “they” system that he sees at work behind the manipulative extravagances of the text.

There on the desk, this chapter! Completely written, typed. I read with rising fear, terror.



*I did not write this chapter.*

Typed on my machine. My paper. No notes, no rough drafts, no corrections. A perfect, finished copy.

They of course have done it.

They think I don't know them! Subtle, and insane plot, hatched so long ago (400).

And “they” have, of course, written his “[s]habby filthy prose” (400). And Halpin, the character and narrator produced by Lamont, also comes to think that he is being written by somebody else. The text foregrounds the act and process of writing and the textuality of characters. It creates a medley and puzzle of pieces and perspectives, of characters that move inside and outside the novel in progress (which, as the novel within the novel, *is* in fact the novel), of literary parodies, satirical attacks against all participants in the publishing business, of lists of incoherent items, names, gifts, birth dates, events, in short, of a confusing multiplicity of frames, planes, and dimensions of signification. It is a literary game that demonstrates how language, having become autonomous, contends with writer and narrator and character, takes over the role and the generating power of the text — but, of course, being a narrative discourse, it *cannot* and *does not* wish to abolish character and narrator(s) nor the psychological code and the idea of an autonomous self (cf. the insipient madness of Lamont). Indeed, the opposition and interrelation of *word and being* open quite new horizons for the imagination. Opening these new horizons, the fictional situation develops four competing, interrelating narrative dimensions that heighten the complexity of the text that again heightens the narrative play-factor, or vice versa: (1) language (“They”), then (2) characters: first Halpin and Beaumont (in Lamont’s book) then Halpin, Beaumont and Lamont (all three as character in Sorrentino’s book); (3) the relation between character (Halpin) and author (Lamont) within another author’s, Sorrentino’s, text; and (4) Halpin, Lamont and an anonymous character as competing narrators. All four levels are related to one another by the game of *power* and *resistance* that determines all the narrated levels and situations and allows their combination and exchange.

All planes are ontologically different. Yet as fictions upon fictions all levels function in terms of character and situation. One plane is the basic narrated situation, always present and always changing. The others are imposed upon this situation. They create *meta-situations* above the ground-level of the narrated character and situation, a procedure by which the narrated situation increases both its dependence and independence. In this process not only are the interrelations/oppositions of situation and character experimented with in the spirit of irony and play, but the dualism of character and situation is also extended, for purposes of further complication, into the quadrangle of character, situation, author, and discourse. All four become *independent* players in the game of construction and deconstruction, and their varying interaction serves the postmodern maxim of multiplication and multiperspectivism. It is quite obvious that when discourse multiplies its planes, characters and situations do not disappear but also multiply, though on different (ontological) levels. In fact, whatever the playing-field, without characters and the various concepts of character (textual, functional, essential), without their interrelation and contradiction, the text obviously could do nothing, would be mere verbiage.

## 7.6. Reader Response

Of course, the reader cannot be left out of consideration in a study of character in postmodern fiction. In the communication-model text, the reader and his or her expectations, notions, desires, play an important part. If, as Barthes holds, the goal of the literary text “is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text” (1974), because only the recipient’s participation in the creative process can guarantee against boredom, then the reader’s creative participation is also called for in the creation of character. Thomas Docherty even argues that the character of postmodern fiction is not situated in the text but in the reader (see 1983, 8). Being part of the process of signification, the recipients of the text read the produced character in its dual nature as sign, as signifier linked to other signifiers, *and* as a signified, linked to the world; and they interpret character not only according to the specific textual and cultural codes embedded in the narrative but also those of their own worlds, which include ideas of character, identity, wholeness. And

even though the reader might live “in a delightful culture of irrationality” (Federman, in LeClair and McCaffery 138), he or she needs a frame of reference for the understanding of fiction, and this frame is provided, as argued above, by the situational constitution of fiction and the sequence of situations, or what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, distinguishing text and story, has called the “story” (which is made up of situations): “in the text, characters are inextricable from the rest of the design, whereas in the story they are extracted [by the reader] from their textuality” (1986,33). Since the semiotic systems are doubly articulated into forms of expression and forms of content, the character is indeed, in Eco’s words (borrowing the terms from Hjelmslev), “an element of an *expression plane* conventionally related to one (or several) elements of a *content plane*” (1979, 48), and the content plane includes or calls up in the reader psychological, social and moral codes.<sup>120</sup>

The reader’s role has not only something to do with his or her sense of “reality”, for the reader’s concept of character is a construct of the mind anyway, and it is a construct in multiple ways and for multiple reasons. The reader’s image of character has always been a blending of “reality” and fiction, either because of the presuppositions he or she holds or because of the ultimate unknowability of people and oneself. The cherished prejudices of the reader are related to the traditional, culturally enforced, anthropocentric ideas of character, its uniqueness and centeredness, which are strengthened by the presuppositions and clichés offered by the media. The latter may have dissolved the difference between the real and the unreal by no longer presenting and judging the character according to the standards of “reality” and probability but rather according to the rules of the spectacle to which they pay homage, yet they obey the anthropocentric image of character since they serve the purpose of evasion. As Cohen and Taylor write: “All around us — on advertisement boardings, bookshelves, record covers, television screens — these miniature escape fantasies present themselves. This, it seems, is how we are destined to live, as split personalities in which the private life is disturbed by the promise of escape routes to another reality” (139). These escape routes to another reality — be they banal and fed by TV series, or be they nostalgic and reactivate humanistic ideas of self-centeredness, self-reliance, and self-responsibility — have in common that they raise the image of a

“round” character. And this is exactly what the postmodern writer knows, reckons with in his or her fiction, and supposedly wants to change by destabilizing any fixed and centered idea of the world. The author of course cannot change or eliminate the illusion that the character is self-determined and psychologically coherent. Despite being illusionary, this character-concept has become one of the foundational ideas of Western civilization and thus has a “reality” of its own that has image-building power and that the writer even longs for, but feels obliged to question both in the name of truth and the liberation of the mind from stifling clichés. Even if the writer flattens the character, he or she always speculates on the indissoluble tension between ideas of “flatness” and “roundness”.

Summing up the argument at this point, we might say that, since postmodern fiction harbors a multiplicity of character-notions, these different character-models — textual, functional, essential — are necessary for criticism, too. The multifariousness of character-perspectives both results from and produces the spirit of play and irony and the comic and the parodic modes, which guarantee a flexibility of viewpoints. Narrative articulates not only one position but several. Multiplicity is the keyword of the times. Having given up the ideology of mimesis and interiority, the postmodern novel has available the whole range of possibilities that have emerged in the last two hundred years.<sup>121</sup> No longer is any single totalizing stance the absolutely “right” one, but there is, under the terms of possibility-thinking and possibility-narration, an interplay of various, or rather, of all paradigms of character, “traditional realistic [ones]” (Brooke-Rose 1981, 366) and “selves infolding and unfolding in dazzling perspectives, leaving the merest trace of a script” (Tatham 138). This reference to character in all its versions is true not only for the “hybrid” texts of Joan Didion (*Democracy*) and Don DeLillo, but also for all of the texts of Elkin, Hawkes, Gass, Barth, Pynchon, and other postmodernists. As David Carroll writes: “If the tendency in recent fiction is for the novels themselves to expose and even assert the linguistic-rhetorical properties around which they are supposedly constructed, this in no way means that these novels must be read only in terms of ‘form,’ of their ‘linguistic generation,’ or that the ‘pure play’ of the signifier has effectively eliminated all problems of subjectivity. The subject ‘haunts’ the signifier too, which means, that the subject is still in question in fiction as well as theory” (1982, 26).

Since the maxim of postmodernism is pluralism of codes, that must also be the guiding principle for the understanding and the analysis of the postmodern fictional character. The priority of approaches, however, needs to be reversed. If formerly the concept of *essence* took priority, this role has now been taken over by *function* and *perspective*. Essence has withdrawn into one position among others, though even “under erasure” it is always present and ready to appear and strengthen the role of character in the narrated situation. When McCaffery suggests to Sukenick that “your generation of writers assumed that depth psychology, at least temporarily, didn’t need further exploration?” he answers: “Not exactly. Contemporary fiction still [...] has to deal with ego psychology. But it doesn’t have to *focus* on it necessarily”. The “interest in ego psychology”, has changed from “Freudian depth psychology” to what Sukenick calls “the broadest definition of psychology — say, the psychology of the way the mind works”. In fact, “in fiction there are a lot of other things that underlie the creative process before ego psychology, like the whole cognitive faculty and just how we make sense of patterns”. Indeed, he maintains that his “approach is an investigation of the creative power of the mind, of the imagination itself” (LeClair and McCaffery 286, 289). In the following sections, we will investigate “the creative power of the mind, of the imagination itself” and interpret a number of texts under the heading not of character, but its mental activities — perception, reflection, behavior and action, emotion, desire and belief — and demonstrate the isolationability of these sensual and psychic activities as well as their performance in view of a more comprehensive concept of character and the self.

### **7.7. Character and Situation: The Activities of Consciousness and the Creation of Imaginary Worlds**

The modes that define the relationship between character and situation, feeling, desiring, thinking, acting, are anthropological *constants*, but the specificities of the situation produce *differences* in attitude and experience. The search for truth is an anthropological constant, but the answers are different. Desires, thoughts, and actions are motivated by dissatisfaction, curiosity, and the wish to understand the world and to extend the limits of subjectivity. These mental drives and activities are perspectivized in quite different ways

in modern and postmodern fiction. The modern character is defined by doubt, anxiety, and frustration at limits, at the closure of possibilities; no answer satisfies the quest for identity and truth. The postmodern narratives take this for granted and widen the “explanatory gap”, radicalizing epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic problems that have been dominant at least since Descartes’s invocation of the method of doubt; they raise questions about the mind’s functioning, the status of concepts, beliefs, judgments, feelings, desires, actions, the imagination and the artifice of the narrative; they probe without precepts into the “antithesis of the known and the unknown” (Hegel 1977, 280), or, rather, render this antithesis irrelevant because there is nothing that can be known objectively.

While philosophy, psychology, and the natural sciences have attempted to close the explanatory gap, literature has been busy to keep it open; indeed, one of the characteristics of the development of the novel since the eighteenth century may be understood as the tendency to widen the gap, to give more space to the unexplainable, the irrational, the ineffable. Concepts of reality and truth have been supplanted by those of attitudes and perspectives; and epistemology (the science of knowledge) has been complemented, even replaced, with hermeneutics (the science of understanding, of perspective). Gass in *The Tunnel* has Kohler call out irritably: “What trivial nonsense truths are, how false in fact their elevation. It’s a mere name, yes, a flattering designation, [...] a pure canard, this Truth; it’s Descartes’ deceitful demon set in his cups to dream a doubting I [...] just one more tasteless jape of Nature, or, if you like, the last itty-bitty fib of God” (269). Whatever the expository text may do with the idea of truth, the narrative has to prove, to experiment with, to delineate this *loss* of truth, its reduction and expansion in its situational construct. The relation between character and situation is *the* crucial matrix for the fictional methods of testing, doubting, and playing.

The character in its wholeness used to dominate this relationship. Yet as the result of the decenterment of character in postmodern fiction, the fictional character can be de-constructed exactly along the lines of analytically separable human faculties or activities that determine the relation between character and situation. In Gass’s *Tunnel*, Kohler says pensively: “Is that the way I am

divided ... into faculties? No one should be a university. Not that stiff-eyed multitude that fractured plurality of egos” (43). The “plurality of egos” and the variety of faculties or rather mental activities and their contradictions are the playing-field of characterization in postmodern fiction. The activities of consciousness are as it were “abstracted”, i.e., isolated and disconnected from one another and from the situation. We have selected four such activities, *perception*, *reflection*, “*behavior*”, and *action/event*, which we will later examine in more detail. They steer and control the relation of the character with the world and its representation. This relationship between character and situation may accentuate the dominance of the subject or that of the situation, may emphasize activity or passivity, consciousness or action. Consciousness and action are the two, structurally analogical conceptual features that define character. Two of the selected aspects of human activity, perception and reflection, refer to consciousness in a narrower sense, the other two to action, a more passive or active manner of conduct.

The modes of perception, reflection, behavior, and action/event have to be understood in our context as abstract functions on a scale of innumerable possibilities and necessities of transition and connection. (1) Perception is the ability to be conscious of things; it involves the stimulation of an organ and seems to that extent more “passive” in nature than, for instance, reflection. It is assimilated to sensation but also to judgment. To see that something is the case is already to apprehend and thus to know it as such, which presupposes a certain understanding of the world in spatio-temporal terms. In fact, all the acts of the mind are intentional in terms of knowledge and involve a concept-mediated awareness of the object perceived, a sense of its presence or absence; they are therefore not purely passive processes. (2) The active and conscious *reflection* of the mind relies on concept-possession, concept-use, and belief. Reflection has a “story” that is closely related to perception and judgment. Reflection can be the discursive and judgmental thinking that Kant has in mind, or it can be an absolute activity in the way Hegel defines it (we will come back to this point later). Hegel’s concept, however, does not change reflection’s basic structure. Action is subdivided into (3) the subconscious, unwilled, routinized, and not self-controlled “*behavior*” of a character that occurs in

answer to the requirement of the situation and does not need reflection, since it relies on the used-to, though it can give rise to a process of thinking, especially when something unexpected happens. Behavior stands in contrast and into relation to (4) the agent's conscious, self-willed, and self-controlled, not routinized but future-oriented *action*, which according to Hegel defines character, is the signature of freedom, and signifies the dominance of the situation by the character (Derrida 1988b). Action has a "story" that is closely related to perception and reflection, with a before and an after the fact. While in the lifeworld the four mentioned activities form a continuum of causal processes, postmodern fiction gives preference to the one and weakens or excludes the others. Both perception and behavior are specific ways of connecting to the situation, but they can also be considered reduction-models of reflection and action processes respectively. By reducing the interrelation between character and situation to only one mental state or disposition (with the others in subordinate, partly unexpressed function), character is decentered, and character and situation can be played against one another. In this way, both kinds of logic, that of the character and that of the situation, and the reasoning of their interrelation can be suspended; both character and situation then become fantastic. Where the situation would "normally" require action, the character only "behaves". Where inner conflicts would demand the depiction of emotion, the subject reacts by only passively perceiving and "behaving". Where one would expect the character to be active in reflection, he or she is described as an object.

## 7.8. Emotion

Since we shall not treat emotion, desire and belief separately, though they will continuously enter the argument, this is the place to give some attention to their structure and function, and also to their use and appearance in postmodern fiction. Again, as with all other fundamental properties of character, the presence/absence dialectic is the basis of their functioning in the text. Whether emotions, desires, or beliefs are represented or left out depends on the role that interiority, self-examination, and inner conflict play in the representation of character. But just as the character itself, emotion and desire can also appear "under erasure". Since they are



constitutive parts of consciousness, they cannot be abolished even when they are hidden. They are perspectival; they influence the way experience is created. They underlie, motivate, accompany, and result from all the different modes of constituting the situation. They are placed within the process of perceiving and comprehending an intended object, stimulate this process, and are integrated in it. Compared to such other human activities as perception, cognition, and action, emotion and desire are more fluid, wide-ranging, and evasive. They are more dependent on other activities of the mind than is the case with cognition and perception and even belief.

Perception has its “center” in the body (and the object), cognition in rationality, and belief in a proposition. Emotions have their center in the soul, but nobody has yet defined the place the soul should occupy in the psychic apparatus except that it is located somewhere, in Plato’s terms, “between” body and (rational) mind. And nobody seems to be sure if he or she needs a soul or not. Pynchon in his novel *Mason & Dixon* speaks of the “Emptiness” of “the Soul” (204), “the dead Vacuum ever at the bottom of [the] soul, — humiliation absolute” (356). Gass in an interview says, “[t]hat little silent inner squeak — that’s all that’s left in our world of the soul” (Ziegler and Bigsby 157). The Reverend Furber in Gass’s *Omensetter’s Luck* notes: “You may call our soul our best, but this, our body, is our love [...] The moist soul hangs about the body, too heavy to rise” (213). And Kohler reflects in Gass’s *The Tunnel*: “the soul in our life is the silted delta of the senses, their accumulated fat” (47); indeed, “the soul [...] has become as shabby and soiled in its seat as worn-out underwear” (54). But in “The Master of Secret Revenges”, it is said: “The soul is the inner gleam which enables us to see, to understand, to reason as I’m doing now, to skim from one thought to another. It used to be called ‘the candle of the Lord.’ You won’t believe it, but I have seen that light [...] Reason, you know is the one real enemy of God. Reason is the Great Satan” (CS 224-25).

In Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, the question is raised, “what was the shape of Mr. Pivner’s soul? round or oblong? And its actions worth as much as iodine atoms? worth five cents?” (537) In Barthelme’s story “The Photograph”, two English scientists discuss what to do with the photographs that have been taken inadvertently of the soul: “It seems to me to boil down to this: Are we better off *with* souls, or just possibly *without* them?” ‘Yes. I see what you

mean. You prefer the uncertainty.’ ‘Exactly, it’s more creative’” (GP 158-59). And, finally, Borges quotes approvingly a passage by Chesterton, as “the most lucid words ever written on the subject of language”, and, one would have to add, written on the insurmountable barrier between language and the soul. The quote begins: “Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of the autumn forests... Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of them, in all their tones and semi-tones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals” (McMurray 5). That is exactly what the postmodern writers do *not* believe, and want to act against, in their fictions.<sup>122</sup>

The *representation of emotion* located in the “soul” is a fundamental, not only a relative, problem in fiction, especially after the linguistic turn. According to Wittgenstein, feeling is not expressible in language; this is one of the common assumptions in postmodern fiction. Registering depthlessness and the “fragmentation of the subject”, as well as “a new kind of superficiality” in postmodernism, Jameson speaks of a “waning of affect” in postmodern culture; feelings become, in Lyotard’s phrase, “intensities”; according to Jameson, emotions “are now free-floating and impersonal” (1992, 60) — which can be said also of perceptions and reflections. In a later interview, Jameson juxtaposes the modern and postmodern positions: “Anxiety is a hermeneutic emotion, expressing an underlying nightmare state of the world; whereas highs and lows really don’t imply anything about the world, because you can feel them on whatever occasion. They are no longer *cognitive*” (Stephanson 4-5). In Barthelme’s *Sadness*, fear is one of these free-floating “highs” that then paradoxically is attenuated in a diagrammatic style that does not allow psychological coherence; the author says in an interview: “I am writing a novel and the main subject of this novel is fear” (Ziegler and Bigsby 51). Emotion of course is subjected to a perspective of evaluation and a style of representation. Extreme emotion can be attenuated by an “inadequate”, low-key style of representation as in Barthelme, or it can be comicalized as in Elkin. With Elkin, anxiety, fear, and desire produce obsession. Since obsession is a state of excess, it can make anxiety and desire appear comic. According to Elkin “[c]omedy is linked to obsession — to an individually articulated obsession”

(Ziegler and Bigsby 99). The doubt of the efficiency and the productive power of emotion and the distrust in the fruitful interaction of emotion, desire, belief, reflection, and action make them and their interrelation into *thematic issues*. They are used and tested as activities relating to an encroaching world, not independent of a subject, because that is impossible, but independent of, and non-integrated into, the interiority of a self, at least not a totalizing, centered self.

Such a case is the title story of *Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers*. Elkin says in an interview, “there are two kinds of people in the world, those people who are always saying ‘Woe is me,’ because behind the ‘Woe is me’ is a system of thought; and these other people who say ‘Ho, ho, ho,’ and behind the ‘Ho, ho, ho’ is only anecdote, no system of thought at all”. “The criers in the title story have despair, but that’s all they have. The kibitzers only have hope and that’s all *they* have” (Ziegler and Bigsby 98-99). This identification of a specific world-view with an expressive emotion and both with a dualistic idea of character types makes character the mere medium for the exemplification of a way of thinking and feeling. This double-directedness towards concreteness and abstraction is typical of the appearance of emotion in postmodern narrative. It makes even a situation of violence detachable from character and comicalizable, as in Hawkes or Heller, because brutality is abstracted from victimizer and victim. Being separated from thought and value, emotion finally can become arbitrary and express the capriciousness and randomness of the universe. In a playful stance, Elkin even bases the existence of the universe, of God, of Creation, and Art on a “whim” — “the world spins on an axis made out of whim, just pure whim. The ultimate whimmer is God” (Ziegler and Bigsby 102); “fiction is completely arbitrary and whimsical” (104) — and it thus playfully and ironically reverses all traditional concepts of wholeness, authenticity, and responsibility.

The representation or nonrepresentation of emotion participates in the penchant of postmodern fiction towards paradox and creates its own fundamental paradox. Narrative testifies to the fact that feeling is inexpressible in language but *needs* to be expressed to “complete” human relations to the world, for instance in the case of crisis. In Barth’s “Menelaiad”, the presence-absence dichotomy characterizes the emotion of love. The need of

understanding love is at the basis of the struggle between Menelaus and his wife Helen. She refuses to answer why she married her husband other than with the word “love”, which even then disappears in seven cloaks of stories and quotation marks. Since that does not assuage his doubt, Menelaus disappears as a person and survives only as a voice that tells his tale. Barthelme likes to problematize theoretical issues in a story, to concretize the crucial aspect(s) of a problem in narrative figurations. An example is the (non)expressibility of feeling. In “For I’m the Boy Whose Only Joy Is Loving You”, he operates (just like Barth in “Menelaiad”) with two contradictory positions, namely the *impossibility* and the *necessity* of expressing feeling. The protagonist Bloomsbury, being aware of the limited ability of language to express emotion, rejects the wish of his companions to tell them, “how does it feel?” (CB 62) — namely, how does it feel to be separated from his wife. He says that he can speak about the “meaning” of what happened to him but not about “the feeling” (CB 62). Huber and Whittle grow increasingly eager to hear more about his emotional experience, and Whittle offers Bloomsbury “a hundred dollars [...] for the feeling” (CB 63). They hunger for feeling: “Emotion! Whittle exclaimed, when was the last time we had any? The war I expect Huber replied” (CB 62). When Bloomsbury does not respond to Whittle’s demand to “*give us the feeling*”, they stop the car under a tree and beat “Bloomsbury in the face first with the brandy bottle, then with the tire iron, until at length the hidden feeling emerged, in the form of salt from his eyes and black blood from his ears and from his mouth, all sorts of words” (CB 63). By using cruel violence, Hubert and Whittle extort the feeling they crave for from their companion and — in analogy — from art, which they think owes them emotion. This is both a parody of the public’s demand for feeling and an exercise on the linguistic problem of expressing emotion.

Not only has the representation of emotion become a problem in postmodern fiction but the *quality* of emotion has also changed; its *intensity* has been attenuated. The reason may be the lack of great and heroic feelings in a consumer society, the suppression of feeling by the stifling routine of everyday life, the wearing-out of feeling by the over-exposition to violence in the media, or the growing domination of rational thought over feeling and desire. Gass notes, “[w]e take walking for granted, elementary

seeing for granted, yet we find we cannot feel. Thought seems to remove us" (1970, 261); and he says in an interview: "I don't give a shit for ideas — which in fiction represent inadequately embodied projects. I care only for affective effects" (LeClair and McCaffery 158). The dichotomy of feeling and thought is Reverend Furber's problem in Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*. The would-be artist Otto in Gaddis's *The Recognitions* complains about the impossibility of feeling a strong emotion like love:

And this, this mess, ransacking this mess looking for your own feelings and trying to rescue them but it's too late, you can't even recognize them when they come to the surface because they've been spent everywhere and, vulgarized and exploited and wasted and spent wherever we could, they keep demanding and you keep paying and you can't ... and then all of a sudden somebody asks you to pay in gold and you can't. Yes, you can't, you haven't got it, and you can't (663- 64).

Since the character in postmodern fiction is decentered, integrative feelings like joy, anxiety, or pain often lose their clear-cut contours, are diffused if they are registered at all into what one might call "mood", which itself does not necessarily have a definable cause, but is rather marked by indecision as to reason and target. Its ambivalence makes it open to any number of rationally unrelated associations and to rapid and unmotivated change. Just as behavior can be understood as a reduction of action, the irritation of mood is a kind of ersatz for the existential feeling of crisis.

The reduction of emotion to mood, however, is only one possible consequence of the decenterment of character and emotion, time, space, and events. In fact, emotion does not only appear in understated but also in overstated form. The middle state is generally missing. Feeling is either flat and toneless and takes the form of "mood", or it is neurotic, hallucinatory, extreme, adopting either the "passive" and reactive form of *paranoia* or the "active" form of violence. The minimalism of emotion in Robbe-Grillet, Barthelme, or Brautigan is countered by a maximalism of emotion, paranoia, that reacts to the pressures of the System (Pynchon, Burroughs, Sorrentino). It seamlessly fits past and future into a hallucinatory present and seeks to prepare for resistance against exploitation and violence. Violence is the active form of excess. It is carried out indirectly by the anonymous activities of the System or directly by the single person. The reasons of the System are fairly obvious,

absolute dominance over the people, while those of the character are obscure. Sukenick speculates that “maybe we have this feeling [that lies at the root of all] that our emotional life is fossilized and that the way to get back to that authentic source of emotions may be to get back to that precise point where your emotions are totally out of control [...] out of our conceptional control, out of our cultural control, out of our conventional control. *That*, for example, is experience beyond language as far as I’m concerned” (LeClair and McCaffery 285). The feeling that is out of control is not restricted to, but also includes and is expressed in, violence, which is conspicuous in Sukenick and other postmodern authors like Burroughs, Coover, Hawkes, and Pynchon.

Both minimal and maximal emotional responses are related to one another by the situation they react to, the frustrating or threatening indefiniteness of the relation between past, present, and future, the need to rely exclusively on the (unsatisfactory) present for “meaning” and truth, on the conventionalization and clichédness of the forms of emotion, and the impossibility of stating a definite cause and goal of both emotion and desire. Yet the lack of emotion is as much a constituent of character as is the presence of emotion. And both the presence and the lack of emotions are, as Sukenick notes (following Wittgenstein), “experience[s] beyond language” (LeClair and McCaffery 284). Though Bab in William Gass’s *Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife* (n.p. second section) maintains that the writer “feels everything verbally. Objects, passions, actions”, but the language part does not constitute, is only additional to the sense of feeling that reaches beyond the limits of language.

Yet human emotions are not only reactions to, and generators of situations, they are also important *values*. There are values within culture and values that lie in the break of culture. In view of the exhaustion of culture, of rational control, and of utopian hope for the future, the feelings cherished in postmodern fiction are the non-cultural, the non-fixed, the enigmatic emotions, love, care, the awareness of death, and the endless gratification of creativity, of storytelling. Though they are, in Sorrentino’s phrase, “insubstantialities in the Void” (*MS* 256), these basic feelings are all there is in terms of values, but they are paradoxical in nature. As values, love, care, awareness of death, creativity of the imagination, are accessible to discourse; as experience they are not. This opposition

between discourse and experience is at the basis of the texts that speak of love, death, or storytelling. These feelings are heightened and dramatized or enigmatized and playfully circumscribed by linking them, or rather, their discourses, to extreme emotions like fear and dissatisfaction, disappointed desire and resistance. They are represented as *failures*, failing not in themselves but in their connection to desire and reflection and thus in fitting into the chain of mental activities that cannot grasp them. Unsatisfied desire and reflection and language then turn into enemies of (heightened) emotion. Their interaction produces ambiguity because their discourses do not merge. Weakness, repetition, reflection, or “inadequate” representation relativize especially “high” feelings of heroism and prophetism (Barth, “Perseid”, “Bellerophoniad”, *Giles Goat-Boy*), the sense of creativity and love (Barth, Gaddis, Sorrentino), the energy of motivation and love (Hawkes, *Travesty*; Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*; Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*), the love of communication, and the care for the people and the country (Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, *The Franchiser*). Feeling, furthermore, is expressed in a language that contradicts and plays with emotion or implodes it into discrepant discourse or senseless verbiage (Barthelme). Fear of death is the extreme psychic state that needs all the help it can get from other discourses to keep it in check, but discourses do not interact in a balancing way. An example is Barth’s “Night-Sea Journey”, where reflection is set against emotion, without much success. One of the reasons why Barth is attracted to the *Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*, and has recontextualized the narrative frame situation in “Dunyazadiad” (*Chimera*), may have been that in Scheherazade’s escaping death — by alternating between making love and telling tales to the king till the day dawns, postponing the end of the respective tale always to the next night — basic emotion and imagination, love and the magic of storytelling combine to overcome (the fear of) death. Three motifs that participate in the ineffable, the fear of death, the excitement of love, and the magic of storytelling, here interconnect in an existential boundary situation and in their interaction create space for a multi-perspective, for play, irony, the comic mode.

Though they are anthropological constants, the fundamental human feelings face the problems of representation and change. *Love* is the best example. Love has an inalienable “core”, but this core is

inexplicable; it can only be experienced sensuously by the way it appears and performs. The experience of love can only be represented *situationally*, but this experience is unrelatable (cf. Beckett, Borges; and Wittgenstein's above-quoted remark that emotions and "values are consigned to silence", to the realm of the "mystical"). But that does not detract from the importance of love, which is one of the undisputed values of human existence. As the author Lamont puts it in his Scrapbook in Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*: "Love alters not at all when it is confronted by other alterations, nor does it bend or vacillate with benders or vacillators. [...] It cannot be fathomed even though it is a simple thing: a golden ring on a delicate hand, a glittering dime (thin) held gracefully by two fingers in lustrous black kid, it's funny. It's sad. But, unfailingly, it is thought to be beautiful". The problem is that what love is can be answered only "through the agency of certain texts" (291).

Love is an internal, nondisputable but nonexplainable value. In Barth's "Menelaiad", love is a "fearsome mystery", even an "unimaginable notion", and finally "the absurd, unending possibility of love" (*LF* 151, 150). In *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, it has a mysterious, unifying force. Love creates identity. As we will show later, love in *Giles Goat-Boy* has a saving value for most of the positive characters. By the intimate and deeply existential communication between the self and the other, it overcomes all difficulties, suspends the antagonism between action and reflection, body and mind, the present and the future, between appearance and being. In Pynchon's *V.*, "[l]ove is love. It shows up in strange displacements" (*V.* 387). Though love easily becomes institutionalized and the institutions are part of the routinizing System, "[l]ove never goes away, Never completely dies", as Geli Tripping sings in *Gravity's Rainbow* (289). For Blicero the point is "not to love because it was no longer possible to act [...] but to be helplessly in a condition of love" (97), while Roger Mexico believes in love as a guide "to life and to joy" (126). Having lost his beloved Jessica, he has the feeling that "he's losing a full range of life, of being for the first time at ease in the Creation" (629). Falteringly, Otto says to Esme in Gaddis's *The Recognitions*: "It's as though when you lose someone ... lose contact with someone you love, then you lose contact with everything, with everyone else, and nobody ... and nothing is real anymore" (515). In Barthelme's "Rebecca", "[t]he



tenth [reason for writing the story] is that one should never cease considering human love, which remains as grisly and golden as ever, no matter what is tattooed upon the warm tympanic page" (SS1 284). At the end of Gass's *The Recognition*, love seems to be an alternative to art as a force for resisting the counterfeits of a corrupted society. At the end of *The Passion Artist*, Konrad Vost, in making love to Hania, comes to know the "transports of that singular experience which makes every man an artist". Imagination, art, and love enter into a predetermined union; Hawkes explains: "I meant every man as artist simply in the sense that sexuality necessitates a free exercising of the imagination. [...] For me the imagination is always and inevitably erotic [...] art comes first, sex second; there can *be* no sex without what we can only call artistic consciousness" (Ziegler and Bigsby 186, 187).

It is obvious that there is a difference between the unexplainable, enigmatic experience of love and its discourses or the situations it figures in. This is why the postmodern writer can ironize and comicalize the discourses of love without damaging the feeling of love. Situation and discourse can never grasp what love is because the feeling extends beyond all discourses, individual cases, and narrated situations. Yet since love can only be represented "through the agency of certain texts" (MS 291), Lamont in Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* is forced to construct an endless list of possibilities, which turns out to be a rather comicalizing summary of discourses that are in fact irrelevant for the description of what love is. It does not matter because love eludes the definatory power of language anyway. The question is asked: "*Can anyone explain the wonder of love?*" As an answer the goddess Aphrodite appears to "three poor and simple fishermen", asking them to "explain the wonder of love", offering herself for a night of love as prize for the best answer. The reply of the third fisherman is the prize-winning one: "'The wonder of love is' — and here he broke wind — 'catchin' that and puttin' it in a bottle!'" (MS 290) In Coover's story "The Marker", from the collection *Pricksongs and Descants*, love is depicted as a demonic/comic spirit. In this story a young artist called Jason puts his book aside in preparation for going to bed, but then he wanders around the room without orientation. Finally, directed by the laughter of his wife, he finds the bed, makes love to her, wondering, however, for a moment, "if this is really his wife"; he is then reassured by the

thought that “there is no alternate possibility” (90). Yet this closure of possibilities is a mistake because, first, his lovemaking is inexplicably interrupted by the police, and, second, he is horrified to see that the woman he has been engaged with, is indeed his wife, but the rotting corpse of his wife, which then, to make a bad thing worse, “follows him punishingly in movement for a moment, as a sheet of paper will follow a comb” (91).

## 7.9. Desire

Another aspect of character, which deserves a separate treatment before we analyze four links between character and situation — perception, reflection, behavior, action — is the role *desire* plays and its intimate relation to the imagination and to language, which both extend their scope in response to new desires. Desire is an inner state, but it is not clear whether it is an emotion or not. David Hume called it a “passion”, yet denied that such a passion contains “any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification” (1960, iii, 17, 39). The question is whether desire has only a causal, functional role in the determination of action and behavior and the stimulation of reflection and imagination, as a kind of energizing principle, or if it has its own semantic content and intentional character that determines what its object is. One might think of a causal chain that consists of an emotion causing a desire causing an action, or one might locate the emotion within the desire that calls for action, or vice versa. In our context the problem need not be solved. Obviously the relationship between emotion and desire depends on the kind of emotion. Emotions of satisfaction will have a less intimate relationship with desire than those of dissatisfaction. And yet, the nature of desire is such that, whatever its content and intention may be in the concrete case, it also has a function as a general disposition of body, soul, and mind that craves for and initiates change, independent of satisfaction. As a driving force and a causally operative state of the appetitive apparatus, it strives for satisfaction; but since fulfillment produces a static state of satiety and since life is a dynamic process, satisfaction is deconstructed to make room for new desire. Giving birth to ever new desire, desire is in fact insatiable, a principle of inexhaustible energy, rejecting the Hegelian whole, turning to past or future, and

also desiring the impossible. Elkin describes in “Plot” the circle of desire: “Here is character’s oxygen cycle: Vague desire becomes specific desire, specific desire becomes will, will becomes decision, decision action, action consequence. Consequence is either acceptable or unacceptable. If it’s acceptable the chain stops, if unacceptable it begins all over again. But *always*, peeking over the will’s shoulder — to pick up just one element in the chain — is the character’s brooding, critical and *concerned* presence”, ready to “start the chain again” (74).

Since both poststructuralist philosophy and postmodern art shun traditional, totalizing concepts like “meaning”, “truth”, “character”, “identity”, but, influenced by Freud’s libidinal economy, affirm “transformations of energy” (Lyotard), desire as an energizing principle steps into the foreground. In fact, two camps in poststructuralism can be distinguished by their emphasizing either language or desire. Bertens writes: “If we follow Lash in globally distinguishing between two major camps in French post-fifties theory, a Saussurean one that emphasizes language and structure (the early Barthes, Lacan, Derrida) and a Nietzschean one that emphasizes power and desire (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari), then Lyotard is unique in his reorientation from the latter to the former. The general drift in the late 1960s and early 1970s was from the linguistic position to a position that highlighted power and desire” (1995, 134). With regard to the early Lyotard, Scott Lash speaks of an “aesthetics of desire” that is the basis of the “postmodern de-differentiation”, and he notes that “the postmodern”, in its “break with formalism”, “is inextricably bound up with a theory of desire” (174). The free flow of desire, emphasized by the early Lyotard (1971; 1974) and Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus*), of course strengthens force over form, vitalism and intensity over rational intentions and social engagement. Even if desire and its manifold manifestations are repressed by the System, or if desire is no longer directly expressible, it is still at the basis of everything that is said, not the least as a vague mood of dissatisfaction. Hassan writes: “[T]he main point is this: art [...] is becoming, like the personality of the artist himself, an occurrence without clear boundaries. [...] That is why Jean François Lyotard enjoins readers [...] to recognize as truly artistic nothing but *initiatives* or events, in whatever domain they may occur” (1977, 57).

Any number of postmodern writers, for instance Barthelme, Elkin, Gaddis, Gass, or Sukenick, demonstrate that the desire for change, for metamorphosis, but also for satisfaction is a fundamental given of the character's psyche. Gass's fictions thematize the disparity of human faculties; they are fictions of desire, of the desire to close the gap between knowing and living, reflection and feeling, the intellect and the senses. In his story "Mrs. Mean" from *In the Heart of the Heart of The Country and Other Stories*, the narrator/artist figure is torn between his urge for abstraction and imaginative projections on the one hand, and the drive for contact with reality on the other: "The desire is as strong as any I have ever had: to see, to feel, to know, and to possess!" (141). In Gass's novel *Omensetter's Luck*, Henry Pimber, who despairs of his low position in life and his separation from nature, desires "the chance of being new ... of living lucky [like his model Omensetter] and of losing [the current] Henry Pimber" (58), by entering the romantic dream of living simply and in natural harmony. In Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Stanley desires to write a musical work that would be "the expression of something higher", that would reach out for "some transcendent judgment" (659), while Gwyon in the same novel desires to "recall, and summon back, a time before death entered the world, before accident, before magic, and, before magic despaired to become religion" (16). Finch in Sukenick's *Up* "submits to chance and the gratifications of the moment" but "all he wants to be is somebody else" (216). Nixon, in Coover's *The Public Burning*, feels "a desire [...] to reach the heart of things, to participate deeply in life" (128). Martin Halpin, character and narrator in Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, looks for "the perfect antidote to cure my gnawing misery of desire" (287), his "[m]ad fleshy desires" (295), his sexual dreams of Daisy Buchanan (287). Elkin connects desire and *will*, the result being a life of *obsession* (not madness), which is also typical for other postmodern fiction:

It's my notion — and I suppose it's a lot of writers' notion — that the thing which energizes fiction is the will. In the conventional fiction of the nineteenth century, it is the will to get out of one class and make it up into another class. We're no longer so interested in that, since everybody more or less has the things that he needs. The conventional drive toward money has been replaced. At least it's been replaced in fiction, and what we read about now — and what I write about — are people whose wills have been colored by some perfectly irrational desire. In the case of Boswell, it is the

will to live forever. In the case of Dick Gibson, it is the will to live the great life which is the trite life. In the case of “The Bailbondsmen”, it is to know the answers to questions that no one can know. In the case of Ashenden in “The Making of Ashenden”, it is the desire to find an absolutely pure human being — someone as pure as himself. In the case of Feldman, it is to sell the unsalable thing and to make the buyer pay as much for it as possible. [...] My characters [...] are well off [...] follow their own, irrational — but *sane* — obsessions which, achieved, would satisfy them. Alas, these guys never catch up with their obsessions (LeClair and McCaffery 117-18).

The protagonist in *Boswell: A Modern Comedy* explains at the end of the book that “I experienced, sharp as pain, deep as rage, a massive greed, a new knowledge that it was not enough, that nothing was ever enough” (365); and in *A Bad Man* the title hero, Leo Feldman, in an onset of self-doubt sees his life, in a paradoxical formulation, as “a life of wanting things found wanting, calling out for the uncalled for” (217). The excess of desire over its potential satisfaction makes it impossible for desire ever to be complete, to attain a satisfactory form, ever to be completely expressed even in wishes or in language; it thus either exhausts itself, which also exhausts life (cf. Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*), or it defers complete satisfaction to the end of life and, by analogy, the end of history, as well as beyond language and the end of the story, thus also thwarting and mocking the reader’s desire for a satisfactory final resolution, which he or she expects in consonance with the traditional epistemological and ethical assumptions. As Sukenick points out in the story “The Permanent Crisis”, the problem is that desire cannot fulfill itself without form and goal, and that thinking about purpose and goal blocks and exhausts desire instead of stimulating it. The husband/author experiences writer’s block and a personal crisis in his relation to the world. His capacity to desire something is exhausted, or rather the forms and goals of desire are worn out. He feels something “like the exhaustion of desire no, more, as if he couldn’t discover the forms for desire, or as if he wanted nothing because he could find nothing to want” (DN 2).

As we saw before, Barthelme in some of his stories likes to make a narrative issue out of human attitudes and the concepts abstracted from them. He thus ironizes, for instance, belief, desire, and also irony itself. In “On the Step of the Conservatory”, he renders “a picture of Never Enough”, of the “exacerbating” (Ziegler

and Bigsby 59) drive to attain ever better and more satisfactory things and results. In “Daumier”, he structures the whole story in terms of the dialectic of desire and satisfaction, ironizing at the same time the idea of a “real” and “true” self. The writer/narrator Daumier speaks to his wife of the “dirty great villain”, the self, the point being that “[i]t is insatiable. It is always, always hankering. It is what you might call rapacious to a fault. The great flaming mouth to the thing is never in this world going to be stuffed full” (*Sad* 163-64). Since he fears that “[t]he false selves in their clatter and boister and youthful brio will slay and bother and push out and put to all types of trouble the original, authentic self” (*Sad* 163), he decides to construct surrogate selves in his fiction in order to ease the dilemma. And indeed, the “authentic” self appears to have succeeded in creating a surrogate Daumier who “is doing very well” since he “knows his limits. He doesn’t overstep. Desire has been reduced in him to a minimum” (*Sad* 164). However, since he is thus only “in principle fifty percent sated”, Daumier then creates a second surrogate person, “a quiet, thoughtful chap who leads a contemplative life”. The latter, in the course of meditation, makes one of the most important statements about how satisfaction can be attained: “It is easy to be satisfied if you get out of things what inheres in them, but you must look closely, take nothing for granted, let nothing become routine. You must fight against the cocoon of habituation which covers everything if you let it” (*Sad* 179). “There are always openings, if you can find them. There is always something to do” (*Sad* 183). The double-edged irony of the story, however, is that the author Daumier becomes attracted to the Lady Celeste, of whom the first fictional surrogate Daumier is enamored, “gets her out of his [fictional, surrogate] life and into [his] own” (*Sad* 177), i.e., his “real” life, and then he packs his surrogate selves away until he should need them again. Satisfied for the present (though he knows that this satisfaction is only for the moment), he repeats the second surrogate self’s insight in almost identical words, thus phrasing a possibility that, if it could come true, which it never does, would make people happy. There is, however, at least an attenuated utopian hope, which, however, paradoxically does not depend on the uniqueness and authenticity of the self, but on the disposal of the self and its dissolution as center: “The self cannot be escaped, but it can be, with ingenuity and hard

work, distracted. There are always openings, if you can find them, there is always something to do” (*Sad* 183).

The desire for openings complicates the relation of desire to consciousness and thought. The relation between desire and other mental activities like feeling and thought is fundamentally elusive and opaque. As a dynamic disposition, a source of energy, desire contains the reason for what it wants in itself, constituting an unending sequence of desire-satisfaction- desire, etc.: movement. If satisfaction is not reached, this does not fundamentally change the situation, for then desire either carries on with the same intentional target ad libitum, or it slackens and starts a new sequence. When desire stops, life stops. As an energizing principle, desire is something different from emotion, though in every concrete case it closely interacts with other causally operative states such as emotion and thought in a causal chain. Desire also kindles the *imagination*, not as a psychic factor in a concrete case with a specific semantic content and the function to initiate a specific concrete action, but as an abstractable dynamic disposition, a causally operative principle that calls for change. It actually can be said to blend with the imagination that, as the performer of possibility-creations, has a similar kind of structure. The imagination yearns for and desires the state of the other, satisfies this desire by the creation of its figurations, and then exhausts satisfaction, creates new desires and satisfactions, and so on ad infinitum. This desire-satisfaction-desire pattern of the imagination in postmodern fiction turns into the “pure” drive for deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a desire for abstract/concrete expression of the drive itself, its self-creation by means of the substrate of the story and its language. This process of pure desire then also (re)creates the self as language and as narrative process in the manner that Federman and Sukenick describe in above-cited passages.

This primary role of desire (for the other, for something indefinable, unreachable) distinguishes in one way or another, as *obsession*, *mood*, or *stimulus of the imagination*, both the writing and the characters of postmodern fiction. Federman speaks of “the looseness, the irrationality, the delirium of my language” (LeClair and McCaffery 137). One might argue that it is the *desire for the other* (and the aura of mystery and the complication of psychology) that is one of the legacies that postmodern narrative bequeathed to the

fiction of the eighties and nineties. A wide variety of authors, for instance, in alphabetical order, Paul Auster, Harold Brodkey, Richard Ford, Ernest G. Gaines, Barry Hannah, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tony Morrison, Harold Powers, and others that figure in the literary scene of the eighties and the nineties, bear witness to the unavoidable influence of the postmodern scenario. This obsession with desire, together with the unattainability of its objects, and the production of immense energy between the two poles, dissatisfaction and desire, are also an important reason for the prominence of the “novel of excess”, which provides a wide outlet for the narrative energies not only in Barth, Pynchon, Coover, Gaddis or McElroy, but also in Brodkey, Powers, Mailer, and others.

### 7.10. Belief

Related to desire, emotion, and thought is *belief*, which is a propositional attitude. It cancels or reduces by factual, moral, metaphysical commitment the complexity of mental processes; it has the virtue of saving the subject from the ambiguity of self-consciousness, and compensates for the fundamentally instable and incomplete nature of enlightenment and of all notions of meaning. Various kinds of belief are defined by their immediate objects and situational circumstances, their strength and grade of certainty, their comprehensiveness, or the narrow or wide range of their application. Belief can be public or private, specific or general. On an abstract, generalizing level, “the ideology of belief forms the basis of the conviction that a given regime reflects the natural order and hierarchy of the world and embodies in its principles a universally valid ideal of human life”. The psychology of belief claims “that a prior acceptance of values is necessary for a true comprehension of the nature of things” Cascardi 1992, 180).<sup>123</sup> Beliefs are principles open to validation and refutation; they are structured entities related to other psychological states, to knowledge and doubt, to other kinds of mental activity like desire, emotion, reflection, and imagination, with which they stand in (confirmative or negative) causal interrelation.

If the necessary foundations of (self-)belief have been eroded in human consciousness (which is ever mutable and incomplete), the desire to achieve certainty goes the other way, stimulates self-



reflection, and questions belief as a foundational principle, or it falls back into self-deception, accepting a fixed version of belief without further questions. The contradictory impulses of belief and reflection cause and dramatize a split of the self, a struggle between faith and doubt. The Reverend Furber in Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* is characterized by the fact that he has a mask of beliefs but in fact has "literally [...] no real beliefs", and that there is a "distance between his feelings and his actions", a contrast "between his inner and outer life" (Gass 1969, 100). Beliefs, however, are not easily got rid of. Gass says in an interview: "Really, it is nice to cleanse yourself of beliefs. It is positively pleasant to find out you don't need to believe. [...] It's a catharsis of the mind. A lot of contemporary writers are trying to kill beliefs off, step on them, finish them off. But, of course, you can't; they spring up again" (Ziegler and Bigsby 166). All the characters in *Omensetter's Luck* are witnesses to this paradoxical need of both having and questioning beliefs. For himself, Gass emphasizes the aesthetic attraction of a system of beliefs: "So, I'm caught between the beauties of belief and the knowledge that most of this is, indeed, false and, indeed, pernicious" (Ziegler and Bigsby 166-67).

Gass's ambiguous attitude towards belief, exhibited in *Omensetter's Luck* or in *The Tunnel*, is programmatic for postmodern fiction in general. Belief is countered by belief, as in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* where the belief in innocence and distance is opposed by the belief in experience and engagement, or in Hawkes's *Travesty* where the belief in design is balanced by the knowledge of life's debris and the belief in life is checked by that in death. Or the principle of belief is challenged by the counter-principle of disbelief. The radical confrontation of the two gives occasion for irony and the comic mode. Barthelme opposes belief and disbelief in the story programmatically called "The Belief". As is often the case, he ironizes the fixedness of human attitudes, indicating the postmodern position of contradiction and ambivalence. He carries both positions, belief and disbelief (and the either-or constellation in general), ad absurdum in the conversation between two female and two male senior citizens. One of the women utters belief in a superstitious formula, to which one of the men responds with an uncalled-for summation of negative views: "I don't believe it [...] I don't believe in magic and I don't believe in superstition. I don't believe in

Judaism, Christianity, or Eastern thought. None of 'em. I didn't believe in the First World War [...] I didn't believe in the Second World War either and I was in it [...] They didn't ask me, they told me [to become a soldier]. But I still had my inner belief, which was that I didn't believe in it" (*GD* 77). The meaning of the word "believe" is then complicated by transferring it from general, abstract phenomena to a factual situation. One of the senior women asks the disbelieving man: "Do you have prostate trouble?" and when he answers in the affirmative, she remarks: "Good [...] I don't believe there is such a thing as a prostate" (*GD* 79). The old man, who has in the meantime further completed the list of what he does not believe in, finally acknowledges only one exception. He believes that "[i]t is forbidden to grow old". The two women agree, but both note in identical words: "I could do without the irony" (*GD* 80).

In all these cases, belief is countered by reflection, be it by the fictional character or by the author/narrator. Yet not only reflection and belief but also desire and belief stand in a dialectic relationship to one another. Desire can assist belief, or it may deconstruct it. Belief in established social and religious norms serves to stabilize the network of psychological states. The social dimension of desire, namely to feel, think, act according to a "transcendental ego" (Kant) and a system of internalized values, creates or supports belief, while it at the same time resists desire as a dark, inscrutable force understood with Freud as an expression of discontent with social conventions, constraints, and rules. Conversely, the emancipatory potential of untamed desire freed from all social constraints thwarts belief-systems and directs its transformative power towards self-enlargement and change. According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, our task is "to learn from the psychotic how to shake off the Oedipal yoke and the effects of power, in order to initiate a radical politics of desire freed from all beliefs" (Seem xxi). The most "natural" interrelation between desire and belief is one of continuous strife and struggle. There is no truly higher or natural principle for synthesizing desire, belief, and reason.

Postmodern fiction stimulates the limit-transcending energy of mobile desire. The latter de-values the rules of narrative and empowers the imagination to transcend every principle of distinction and all boundaries of order. Yet beliefs do not disappear. Their signification of continuity, coherence, and union is pertinent for the

construction of narrative, even if belief and its fixedness are played with, ironized, and negated. Beliefs, truths, conventions are operational media and signposts of orientation that build up a horizon of formation and stability. They are needed for the composition of narrative and the organization of its flow of time because, even if the force of life and not the form of order is the goal of narration, force, flow and change only become visible against the background of pattern and structure, the forms of containment and determination. Beliefs emerge as part of a multiperspective that in its struggle with beliefs, their “fixities and definites” (Coleridge), keeps open the balance of possibilities. It thus produces uncertainty; and uncertainty becomes a source of productivity. Gass says, “I don’t know, most of the time, what I believe. Indeed, as a fiction writer I find it convenient not to believe things. Not to disbelieve things either, just to move into a realm where everything is held in suspension”; and he adds, “it would be a grievous disappointment if we ever solved anything” (LeClair and McCaffery 22, 30).<sup>124</sup> In postmodern fiction, the mental activities themselves and their values take the forefront, not the effect of desire and feeling, thought and belief upon a center, or a character and its interiority. The values of *stasis* like *belief* and *truth*, narrative tradition struggle with those of *dynamis* — the *energy* of renewal, the *processes* of perception, thinking, feeling, desire.

There is one more circumstance that has to be mentioned in this context. Beliefs and truths not only dissolve under the impact of reflection, desire, and imagination, they, so to speak, take their “revenge”. The liberating psychic flow, the desire for deconstruction, for opening borderlines and the dissemination of meaning again reify into beliefs, as is obvious in the poetological statements of the writers quoted above, which then again are dissolved in the practice of narration (as is especially the case with Gass and Hawkes). The strategies of storytelling then are reflected upon again and abstracted into maxims, to be flexibilized again in the process of narration, and so on ad infinitum. The circle, the spiral, or the Moebius strip are obviously enlightening metaphors for postmodern fiction; they describe not only the energy of storytelling and the interrelation and struggle of mental capacities but also the unending rivalry and contest of practical and theoretical performances.

### 7.11. Perception, Consciousness, and the Object

“*Perceiving*” the outer world of space, time, people, and events is a matter of the senses. It is intentional, depends on a spatio-temporal pre-understanding of the world, on concept-possession and concept-use, on judgments; it rates the experience as illusory or true. In all cases, perception underlies the duality of consciousness, of consciousness that is not only always conscious of something but also conscious of being conscious of something. Sense-perception has a functional role within the mental economies; it is assimilated to other mental phenomena, which are paradigms of intentionality, beliefs, emotions, desires, and actions, while it is at the same time their irrefutable base. Vaihinger claims that “only what is felt, what confronts us in the world of perceptions, whether it be internal or external, is real” (105). The belief in the primacy of perception permeates the whole work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But also the reverse is true: perception also depends on consciousness. Merleau-Ponty notes: “However firm my perceptive grasp of the world may be, it is entirely dependent upon a centrifugal movement which throws me toward the world” (1974, 124-25). Consciousness, being always intentional in its perceiving something, in Wittgenstein’s terms, is a “seeing as” (1958, xi, and *passim*) the “echo of a thought in sight” (212) or, in Scruton’s words, an “unasserted thought” (chs. 7 and 8), the “seeing [of] aspects”.

Kant, Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Sartre have all emphasized that, in picturing something, the images are forms of consciousness of an object, and generally fragmentary at that; they may also be a direct function of memory, but are not identical with the objects they represent. And in consciousness, Whitehead says, “[t]here will be a general idea in the background flittingly, waveringly, realized by the few in its full generality — or perhaps never expressed in any adequate universal form with persuasive force. [...] But this general idea, whether expressed or implicitly just below the surface of consciousness, embodies itself in special expression after special expression” (1969, 18-19). There is an interrelation between the things seen, the consciousness of seeing these things and a “general idea” or “the echo of a thought”. Together they structure the activity of consciousness’s seeing things and of consciousness’s being conscious of seeing things. The perceptions themselves, according to

Wittgenstein, are either subject to the will (seeing an aspect) and to cognitive states (supposing, hypothesizing), or derive from the unconscious, or they combine the conscious and the unconscious. The representation of perception may focus on the *external* thing, on observation, may even display an extreme externalism, thus keeping a distance between subject and object; or it may be expressive and *emotionally attuned* to the intended target, dissolving the distance; or it may subsume all that it perceives under the *general idea* that is the basis of understanding and may make the thing seen a symbol of thought; or it may create a desire for *action* that would change the situation with a special purpose, a given goal in mind.

The consciousness of something and the consciousness of being conscious of something together define the relation between subject and object, and with it the self-understanding of the subject. The relation between subject and object has become problematic, at the latest since Kant, up to the point where the relation between mental image and object of the image, between signifier and signified, has lost all transparency. This creates a potential of discrepancies, insufficiencies, problems that postmodern narrative is subject to and makes use of. One way to employ this problematic relationship between subject and object is to cut off the normal processing of the perception-data by the categories of understanding, so that perception stands alone, with or without (futile) attempts of consciousness to understand what is perceived by reflecting upon it. In the following, we are concerned with various cases of such an isolation of sense-perception for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, a procedure that may involve the suspension of the causal processes of the mind. Our examples provide three versions of this reductionist method of world-making and world-understanding. Beckett's short prose piece "Imagination Dead Imagine" deconstructs the perceiving subject, which becomes the narrative voice, confronted with the mystery of the imagination and a kind of universal void. The "general ideas" of consciousness that here direct the sense-impressions are universal ideas, i.e., imagination and life. Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* reduces the subject to a perceiving consciousness engulfed by the object world that reifies the emotions; the general idea within consciousness in this case is both general and personal: it is jealousy. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* exemplifies the implosion of objects into the self, which feels like an empty shell; the idea in the

background is the existence of a “terroristic universe”, from which the self attempts to escape by movement, transformation, and metamorphosis of the body. All three examples show a passivity of the subject; perception is being used to represent the unknown, to cover the void, or to avoid the dominance of the other. In all cases, a note of mystery pervades the narrative. It is the result of the failure of consciousness to coordinate and order its faculties in the processing of the data of experience.

At this point one more qualification has to be made with regard to the relation between “perception” and “behavior”. Of course, the “behavior” of a subject, which is here distinguished from merely perceiving a situation, can also include mere observing, just as behavior itself can also be observed, and in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* the description of gestures and movements goes hand in hand with the description of inanimate objects, though the latter by far dominates. But it seems advisable to reserve the term “behavior” for the case of a more “factual” attitude towards what is there. The difference is twofold and will later be demonstrated in an analysis of Barthelme’s work. First, in the case of perception, as it is understood here, there is an active observer, a narrated subject and a narrator; and, second, the presentation of what is seen and can be seen has the cohesion of an *image*.<sup>125</sup> If the conduct of a narrated character is depicted factually, as “behavior”, the narrative perspective is more distant, more reductive; the result then is *diagrammatic* and not image-like, leaving many empty spaces to be filled by the reader. The difference between creating an image or a “diagram” of a situation is the difference between picturing something and merely thinking of it. Creating an imaginary scene obviously need not involve having extensive mental images of it, though what it raises in the mind is always a situation.

### **7.11.1. The Mysteries of the Void: Samuel Beckett, “Imagination Dead Imagine”**

Beckett’s “Imagination Dead Imagine” is a late example of what Hugh Kenner calls Beckett’s “aesthetic of ultra-compression” (207, *passim*). The process of perception articulates, again in Kenner’s words, “the mysteries of voice and person” (226); and these mysteries take the form of paradox, rendered in sharply visual,

concrete terms, in terms of the postmodern situational-paradoxical montage in flux, representing the dichotomies of life and thought, imagination and reflection, beginning and end, continuity and interruption, the void and the filling. The imaginative perception of the piece is written in the typical Beckettian spirit of “I can’t go on, I’ll go on”. Out of a white void appears a white rotunda, in which two white bodies are lying, each in a semicircle, still alive though barely (“Hold a mirror to their lips, it mists”). The text consists of a skeletal prologue that points to the underlying ideas, imagination and life; it describes two different sightings of the rotunda, and a melancholic epilogue that returns to the general idea, the creative potential of the imagination and its failure. The text begins with a refusal to agree to resignation, which is followed by a sudden and magical vision:

No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure. Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of the vault. Two diameters at right angles AB CD divide the white ground into two semicircles ACB BDA. Lying on the ground two white bodies, each in its semicircle. White too the vault and the round wall eighteen inches high from

The reason for the reduction of narrative to the visual is here the enigma of the imagination that resists understanding and the paradox of the imaginative act that, despite an act’s logically being defined by its intentionality, appears to lack this intentionality, at least recognizable instrumental intentionality, except for an uncoordinated movement in and out and a mechanical activity of measuring. Consciousness is present and appears to follow what happens with fascination but without any will or chance of control. All external conditions are expunged (“islands, waters, azure, verdure”) in favor of the white rotunda, of what sometimes appears to be an inner view of the skull, not quite without irony and humor. Everything is created by sensory impressions in situational application, as physical activities that document the haphazardness of exercising the imaginative faculty at all. Paradoxes that transcend rational power suggest the impotence of consciousness to control and understand the imagination. Everything is dynamic and spontaneous, but highly systematized as well. The immeasurable, the inner world,

is measured spatially, mechanically; so are the residues of life, the two bodies, who “might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible” (“IDI” 65). Like everything else, the imperatives are contradictory: “Go back out [...] go back in”. Confronted with these oppositions, consciousness appears at a loss. Though the attitude of the narrative voice is strictly observant and the description purely visual, an emotional engagement becomes recognizable through the rhetoric of the text. Passivity and activity of the observer interrelate and contradict, just as do perception and reflection, creative production and negation of its results.

What happens is outside and inside; it is a chain of dynamic events, mysterious, uncontrollable, and ineffable. The movement of the imagination, it appears, is free, but overwhelmed and determined by forces not contained by (rational) form; it is marked by the rise and fall of extremes, heat and cold, whiteness and blackness. Their manifestations rotate in circular movements with pauses of incalculable length in between. Though the narrative voice seemingly creates all this, it appears to produce itself in actions independent of human will and ability. Whatever the creating force behind the images, the experiencing subject, being passive consciousness, needs to wait for the results without orientation. The results are always different, never twice the same. The imagination is overwhelmed or reduced at the end by what is pure vision without interpretation, pure force without form, pure changing performance without recognizable “reality”. Though its different manifestations are “supplied by the same source”, consciousness has “still no trace” of this source. In this text, stability is only guaranteed by the play of extremes, however, not by the extremes themselves, i.e., heat and cold, whiteness and blackness, which combine in the performance, but rather by the pause that interrupts and balances their movements, giving them stability and continuity. Activating the force of the imagination from the void, the subject is made its object, loses the freedom as subject; its exercising will-power passes away in waiting and finally in resignation. The text ends with the words: “Leave them [the bodies] there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in



the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing” (66). Presence has been replaced by absence. There is no middle, only beginning and end, and no repetition, only variation. In Iser’s terms, “the imaginary remains a blank that constantly invites fillings, but then empties itself again when cognitive constraints thematize the imaginary” (1993, 240).<sup>126</sup>

### 7.11.2. “Objectified Subjectivity”: Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*

The “abstraction” of the text from the usual human condition by concentrating exclusively on sensory impression can paradoxically be the result of a new concept of “realism”. That is what Robbe-Grillet said he strived for in reducing the world to visual perception. In an attempt to offer an alternative to the traditional novel and to concentrate on “[g]estures and objects” that are “*there* before being something”, before all patternings and significations, he chooses “a neutral description of the world free of all presuppositions to guarantee the immediacy of the relationship between subject and object, self and other, consciousness and reality” (Carroll 1982, 11). Robbe-Grillet first calls his method “objective realism”; he later revises the term, calling his goal “total subjectivity” or “objectified subjectivity” (*New Novel* 1964, 130ff.), which means that though the world is rendered as it is perceived and valorized by a particular subject, it resists all categorizations in terms of levels, is in fact non-assimilable, is devoid of all relation. In spite of this subjective/objective forging of the objects perceived, “[t]he object is no longer a center of correspondences, a welter of sensations and symbols: it is merely an optical resistance [... H]ere the object does not exist beyond its phenomenon” (Barthes 1972, 14-15).

What this means is exemplified in one of Robbe-Grillet’s earlier novels, *Jealousy*, where the jealous husband/protagonist, a planter, keeps watch from various locations over his wife, called A ..., and her possible lover, Frank, in the balcony-enveloped banana plantation house. Refusing any psychological analysis, rejecting the doctrine of interiority, and denying an opening into dialogue, Robbe-Grillet reduces all emotion to camera-eye visual description from the optical point-of-view of the narrator-protagonist. The levels of objectivity and subjectivity do not interrelate, and human passion

“remains on their surface, making no attempt to penetrate within, since there is nothing inside” (qtd. in Morrisette 33). The consequence is a reification of consciousness and feeling, imprisoned in a universe of hard surface. “Reading becomes a lateral movement from one space to another, contiguous space. But the second space is never entirely distinct from the first” (Gibson 227). Correspondingly, no hierarchizing principle guides the description of objects, persons, gestures, actions, so that the Venetian blind in the house, the banana plantation which surrounds the house, the woman A... combing her hair, all are of equal status and require equal attention. An example is A...’s combing her hair, the (quasi-scientific) description of which, with its overabundance of “neutral”, even seemingly irrelevant details, appears, in spite of the fact that it excludes subjectivity, nevertheless highly subjective:

The brush descends the length of the loose hair with a faint noise somewhere between the sound of a breath and a crackle. No sooner has it reached the bottom than it quietly rises again toward the head, where the whole surface of its bristles sinks in before gliding over the black mass again. The brush is a bone-colored oval whose short handle disappears almost entirely in the hand firmly gripping it. Half of the hair hangs down the back, the other hand pulls the other half over one shoulder. The head leans to the right, offering the hair more readily to the brush. Each time the latter lands at the top of its cycle behind the nape of the neck, the head leans farther to the right and then rises again with an effort, while the right hand, holding the brush, moves away in the opposite direction. The left hand, which loosely confines the hair between the wrist, the palm and the fingers, releases it for a second and then closes on it again, gathering the strands together with a firm, mechanical gesture, while the brush continues its course to the extreme tips of hair (*Jea* 40-41).

Robbe-Grillet’s theoretical statements bestow a paradoxical note on the relation between subject and object. On the one hand, he demands from the reader: “let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references [...]they will be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own ‘meaning’” (1966, 21). On the other hand, he recognizes that seeing means always “seeing *as*”, that it is intentional, is dependent on concept-possession and concept-use, that it relies on a cognitive state (supposing, hypothesizing) and an act of attention, as well as an

underlying feeling, desire, and thought: “Man is present on every page, in every line, in every word. Even if many objects are presented and are described with great care, there is always and especially the eye which sees them, the thought which reexamines them, the passion which distorts them. The objects in our novels never have a presence outside human perception, real or imaginary” (*New Novel* 1964, 137). The author in fact relies on the material surface to represent, both in relations of implication and contradiction, the underlying general emotional cause, which is jealousy, and the strained emotional condition of the observer/husband who closely attends to the visual data in his wish for enlightenment without *expressis verbis* mediating between material, psychic condition and universal/ anthropological theme.

The gap and the indissoluble tension, indeed the clash, between perception and thought gives rise to a chain of at least five paradoxes: (1) The paranoid, jealous obsession is the unifying psychological theme, but it is never overtly analyzed or even mentioned; the emotion of jealousy, which is an emotion of crisis, is based only upon the never quite verified belief of the observer/husband that his wife and Frank are lovers. (2) Though the whole scenario is designed to achieve a result, to clear up the facts and discover the truth, it remains confined to the process of observing, restricted to visual perception, extending only into memories, hallucinations, projections, and thus foregoes closure, which “normally” would be its aim. (3) This process in time paradoxically dissolves time, both “objective” and “subjective” time, the former by de-chronologizing the events, the latter by de-emotionalizing the objects and reifying space. Robbe-Grillet says that time in his texts “seems to be cut off from its temporality. It no longer passes. It no longer completes anything” (155, 22). The result is the creation of a “closed” space. (4) The readers after their first disorientation take the subject’s feeling of jealousy as a (justified) fact, even though the expected emotion (which points to the void behind the surface) can only be sensed by perceiving the surface. The concentration on the hard surface suggests a state of isolation that calls for a cause, which is taken to be jealousy. The text that is ultimately about emotion does not represent emotion and is yet received in terms of emotion. (5) But the scale of response is different for the experiencing subject in the text from that of the

recipient who reads the text. The figurations of perception for the perceiving subject in the text constitute both an open and a “closed” space (open because no clarifying results are achieved by observation, closed because the jealous husband is unable to detach himself from the scenario and his feelings). For the reader there opens a wide space of reactions that extends from the hard surface of what is perceived to the suppositions of the perceiving subject in the text, i.e., jealousy, and beyond to further speculations of his or her own, which may be radically separated from what is being seen and articulated, and therefore, as it were, float in the void. In Robbe-Grillet’s words: “according to the preoccupations of each reader, [the text will] accommodate all kinds of comment — psychological, psychiatric, religious or political — but its “indifference to these potentialities will soon become apparent” (137).

The separateness of the world from, and its indifference to, subjective projections, the emotions and thoughts of both the husband and the reader, allow for a further, more radical interpretation that is based upon what Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus*, namely that “[t]he subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (5.632) and thus cannot be “represented in language”. Concomitantly, later critics have seen Robbe-Grillet’s texts in terms of what Foucault calls the “end of subjectivity” (1970, 387), the repression of the subject by the dominant role of the discourse. While the first phase of (“phenomenological”) criticism, in connection with theoretical statements in *For A New Novel*, emphasized the new “realism” in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction, the second, structuralist, linguistic-formalist phase of criticism, in a rhetorical turn, eliminates from its considerations the role of the subject as center and origin and replaces it with language as the fundamental dimension of the text, which “situates” the subject.<sup>127</sup> Yet these two, basically different approaches, the one speaking of a new realism, the other of the dominance of discourse, only make evident the whole dialectic, the indissoluble paradox of narrative. On the one hand, language appears to work *through* and on behalf of the consciousness of a private subject, and, on the other hand, the (un)conscious intention of language expresses itself *without* subject in an unending flow. What is interesting, however, is the fact that it does not make much difference whether one places the subject outside language as its generator or within language and its textual-

linguistic system as, in Ricardou's words, a mere "formal subject". Both subject and discourse establish as signified a *situation* with space, time, subject, and action (or perception for action) as its constituents, and thus organizes what is basic to all postmodern texts: the balancing (or the disruption) of the subject-object-language-relation or, for that matter, the language-object-subject-relation.

In addition to (1) the dialectic of *subject* versus *language*, the text exemplifies three other fundamental dichotomies of postmodern fiction, (2) the dialectic of *abstraction* versus *concreteness*, the radical concreteness of the surface turning into abstraction of relations and vice versa; their lack of synthesis makes the text unstable and undecipherable; (3) the dialectic of the *animate* versus the *inanimate*, the animate and dynamic, here emotion and desire, both dissolving into the *inanimate*; and (4) the dialectic of *absence* versus *presence*, the text's making evident that the character/narrator's focalization on the surface, the physical world, activates almost automatically a psychological code — an insight that Hemingway already took advantage of with his "iceberg-technique", and that the postmodern novel exploits to the extreme. All four contradictions of opposites together establish the *fantastic* mode that deconstructs the "proper", "normal", and "used-to", decomposes the unity of time, space and character, explores the alien and repressed, concerns itself with gaps and absences, traces the unsaid and unseen and sets signifiers against signifieds. The methods applied to fantasize the world are different, but they all create a state of incongruity. They turn the dynamic into the static and mobility into immobility (Beckett's and Robbe-Grillet's method) or, conversely, transform the static into the dynamic, immobility into mobility (Burroughs's strategy in the following example). They separate subject matter and discourse, situation and language (Borges, Sorrentino, Barthelme). The result is the already quoted "fundamental vagueness", of which Borges speaks (*Ficciones*, 1962, 19).

### **7.11.3. Implosion of the Exterior: William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch***

One can reify the surface and its composition and freeze the distance between object and observer, or one can set things in motion

and dissolve the distance between subject and object, in fact make the subject the object in a process of metamorphoses. William Burroughs follows the latter strategy in *Naked Lunch*. He writes that “there is only one thing a writer can write about: what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing ... I am a recording instrument. ... I do not presume to impose ‘story’ ‘plot’ ‘continuity.’ ... Insofar as I succeed in direct recording of certain areas of psychic process” (*NL* 221, Burroughs’s ellipses). Though Burroughs does not impose a coherent “story, plot” on “what is in front of his senses”, he shapes very well what he sees, hears, feels, or rather he creates it in terms of the imagination, as a fantastic transformation of inorganic and organic matters. They come to dominate and permeate the human body, so that the mind indeed acts as a passive recording instrument of the movements of the body and its interpenetrations with other bodies and matter. The central organizing principle being montage, the book creates blocks of association, which — as “everything is free to enter or to go out” — are connected either by the movement of the “I” through space and time or by the movement of things, persons, races through the “I”, whose body becomes permeable. While in Robbe-Grillet’s book, desire is twice removed from the surface (things, jealousy, desire to know and act), in *Naked Lunch* desire turns into pure energy, becomes the driving force that fires the imagination; it is the desire to escape. Sensual experiences driven by desire produce feelings of joy, wonder, and even “convulsions of lust” at the sense of freedom, of liberation from the limitation of time and space and the controls of a terroristic universe — a sense of freedom that is, however, an illusion, the effect of drugs. The following passage comes from the description of the “City of Interzone in state of Yage intoxication”:

Notes from Yage state: Images fall slow and silent like snow ... Serenity ... All defences fall ... everything is free to enter or to go out ... Fear is simply impossible ... A beautiful blue substance flows into me ... I see an archaic grinning face like South Pacific Mask ... The face is blue purple splotched with gold ... The room takes on aspect of Near East whorehouse with blue walls and red tasseled lamps ... I feel myself turning into a Negress, the black color silently invading my flesh ... Convulsions of lust ... My legs take on a well rounded Polynesian substance ... Everything stirs with a writhing furtive life ... The room is Near East, Negro South Pacific, in some familiar place I cannot locate ... Yage is space-time travel ... The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion ... The blood and substance

of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain, Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian races as yet unconceived and unborn, passes through the body ... Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains (stasis and death in closed mountain valley where plants grow out of genitals, vast crustaceans hatch inside and break the shell of body) across the Pacific in an outrigger canoe to Easter Island (*NL* 109-110).

The surface is here, in contrast to Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, the representation of pure energy; desire and the satisfaction of desire fuse into one. While in *Jealousy* desire "waited", in a way passively without direct expression, behind the emotion of jealousy, *Naked Lunch* places emotions both side by side and behind the desire. Behind the desire of freedom and the corresponding feeling of joy emerges quite another emotion, a feeling of pain, fear, and despair concentrating on the void beneath the psychic state of intoxication. While perception in *Jealousy* registers order, though below order lurks order-breaking force, we see in *Naked Lunch* the direct workings of force in the form of dreamlike images in fantastic situations that emerge from the unconscious and deny interpretation. They escape categorization by radical *metamorphosis* that penetrates the dividing lines between the inanimate and the animate, turns into a radical mobility of particles, bodies, distances. People and things constantly metamorphose into one another without giving pause for the expression of emotion and thought. In these dreamlike, kaleidoscopic scenes, emotion can only be expressed by the "random craving of images", a device that the text makes use of to attain rapid shifts of positions, displacements, superimpositions, expansions, and contractions of fluid space, the change of nearness into distantness, and vice versa. What is behind these continuous imaginary movements through space is the "nightmare fear of stasis" (qtd. in Tanner 1966, 550-51). In *Naked Lunch*, force (of movement and metamorphosis) is set against threatening order of a "terroristic universe", quite in the spirit of Deleuze who said that when the combinations of flux and becoming disrupt the planes of consistency, "[a] thing, an animal, a person are now only definable by movements and rests, speeds and slownesses (*longitude*) [...] Nothing develops, but things arrive late or in advance, and enter into some assemblage according to their compositions of speed. Nothing becomes subjective but hecceities take shape according to the compositions of non-subjective powers and effects" (Deleuze and Parnet 93), here

desire and fear. The world that comes into existence, however, is multidimensional; it is fantastic, bizarre, grotesque. Imaginative transformations of the world stand side by side the satirical denunciation of society and the fear of a terroristic universe, as well as a warning against the drugs that were originally the generators of the flights of the imagination, of movement and metamorphosis.

### 7.12. Reflection and Fiction

Human *consciousness* entails both freedom and bondage, isolation and communication. Reflection and imagination (and perception, emotion and desire) are functions of consciousness; they participate in the creation of its structure, which is act-like in its outer- and inner-directedness. Subject and object form the unity of consciousness and are its two aspects. The individual has the world present in consciousness; he or she possesses and defines *his* or *her* world and *his* or *her* consciousness. Everyone has consciousness; communication with others is possible because, when a human being is conscious of the world, that consciousness, by the possession and use of common concepts, is something individual and general at the same time. In the network of the mind's capacities, *reflection* is cognitive, intentional, and functional. The structure of reflection is defined by the fact that reflection is an intellectual activity, which produces insights by first setting differences and at the same time, successively, uniting the parts by synthesis.

As to its content and intention, reflection is a cluster-concept and as such ambiguous. It is positive or negative, distinguishes or mediates, refers to the actual and the potential, turns "horizontally" to the object and the self, "vertically" to the history of culture and the subject's past, concerns itself with the norms of the superego or the drives of the id or the problematic situation of the ego as mediator. It fills consciousness and is a partner of memory and imagination. The state of its "being" and its functioning, however, raises questions that wait for clarification and leave beyond all rational explanation an "explanatory gap" (Levine 89), so do its cultural construction and its anthropological or idealistic universalism, its phenomenal determination or self-orientation. Verifiable answers to the questions of how consciousness, its activities and their interrelating function appear to be impossible to postmodern writers. One of the most self-



reflexive and philosophically oriented authors, William Gass, in the words of the historian Kohler from *The Tunnel*, takes refuge in metaphors: the “character of consciousness itself” is

empty, of course, thus universal, thus potential, like that of the unborn, or a monster without the electricity of life, or the maiden asleep, waiting to be energized, lived in, filled, a volume; yes, no wonder it ought not to be let out, diluted by things already made, felt, thought, imagined, desired — dragged about, disgraced, defiled, deformed — for it was inwardness without anything in it, without any outside having crept like a wounded animal into its den to hide, perhaps to heal there, a world of material mess and misery, not yet royally imagined, not yet made more than merely into mind (*Tun* 590-91).

The explanatory gap that shields consciousness itself from conceptualization, though its own activity is a constant attempt at conceptualization, has become wider in postmodern fiction; it in fact has swallowed up motivations and rationalisms of the traditional and even modern kind. Yet though we cannot “explain” consciousness and the interaction of its faculties to any satisfactory degree as wholeness, we might differentiate three dimensions of reflection.

(1) After consciousness has taken notice of things, circumstances, situations, events, etc., it can, so to speak, step back and reflect on certain fundamental relationships that exist between the manifold objects and circumstances and the mind’s notions of them and can ascertain sameness or identity here, diversity and dissimilarity there, and contrast or opposition elsewhere. Notions of objects and relations become notions of reflection. The reflective regard oversees the differentiation and coherence of objects and their combinations within larger discourses, establishes hierarchies and different levels of causal efficacy. After Kant’s denial of the possibility of perceiving the “thing-in-itself” and rejection of grounding the categories of understanding in the objectivity of nature or a metaphysical instance, the position of reflection changed. Based on the spatial-temporal synthesis of the sensory experience, the reflective powers of consciousness and their categories (which appear in Kant with a certain unexplained automatism and spontaneity) are seen to constitute the world. They signify, pointing to the world according to a combination of progressive logical steps, without, however, eliminating the possibility of objectively apprehending objects and values and the parallel rationalism of, and

affinity between, patterns inherent in nature and consciousness. This is so even though nature's determinations are not in all respects transparent to the human mind and even though the power of reflection exhausts itself in the process of understanding. The structure of consciousness is fundamentally designative and intentional; it is a system of classifications that does not aim at nature but at forming a habit of mental synthesis, a pattern of orientation; and this system sets the course for a further loosening of the bonds between consciousness and nature and a shifting of the balance towards consciousness, away from the world and nature.

This has consequences for the creation of fictional worlds. The shift of emphasis toward consciousness generates at least four changes. First, consciousness and the world are separated. As a result of this separation, the perception of, and reflection about, objects and places, so important in the nineteenth-century "realistic" novel, can be reified into forms of extreme *exteriorism* that suppress the relations among the constituents of the situation (space, time, character, action/event), impede the progressive logical steps of apprehending the world, and complicate emotional investment in the spatio-temporal syntheses that give the narrated situation its profile (Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*). Second, conversely, not an actual, exterior, spatio-temporal world but rather the *independent creativeness* of consciousness may be foregrounded. This has two results: (a) "consciousness invents its own objects and no longer needs to depend on the limitations of external reference" (*Tun* 412); (b) even though consciousness creates its own field of perception, which is freely fashioned with imaginary data and relations, it establishes nevertheless an "*as-if*" parallelism between consciousness and nature, following in principle Vaihinger's famous, ground-breaking extension and radicalization of Kant's argument (that the "thing-in-itself" cannot be grasped by consciousness) in his *The Philosophy of "As-if"*. Barth, for instance, explores the as-if position, namely that not only reality is fiction but also fiction is reality, in "Menelaiad" (Menelaus, reduced to a voice, functions as a kind of as-if character) and "Anonymiad" (the marooned bard creates a fictional world "as-if" it were real). Sorrentino in *Mulligan Stew* slightly changes the as-if scenario by having Halpin and Beaumont describe the "odd" house they inhabit — where "a staircase leads 'nowhere'" and "disappears into empty space" — as if it were a

“normal” house, in spite of the fact that Halpin speculates without further ado about the possibility “that if we walked into this haziness, we would walk somehow into another dimension” (*MS* 30). Third, Kant’s categories of consciousness — and more so the construction of the world under the premise of an as-if parallelism between nature and consciousness promoted by Vaihinger — take on the character of *languages* of consciousness rather than categories of being. This and Wittgenstein’s idea that only language games can be understood and analyzed while reality hides itself behind the linguistic veil can lead to two results. Either the concretization of space, time, character, or action becomes atrophied into mere *lists* of words, which undermine the situationally structured context that proceeds from the assumption of interrelated constituents (e.g., Barthelme, Gass, Elkin, Sorrentino), or the concretization of a narrated situation is not even seriously attempted; it is drowned in a flow of verbiage that makes the veil of language impenetrable (again, Barthelme, Sorrentino). And fourth, resignation gains ground with regard to an existentially meaningful relationship with the world. The ultimate consequence then is silence. In *The Tunnel* Gass formulates elegantly and wittily some of the relativistic positions that obstruct confidence in the human potential to make sense: “There are no goals, and only errant ways” and “Few ends, yet many means”, or “There is an insufficient reason for everything” (418-19, 453). Such doubts in the concepts of purpose and meaning, “reality” and “truth”, and in the possibility of a clarifying relation between consciousness and the world, would lead “a thinker of real thoughts”, to “think only about the evanescent, and the character and condition of consciousness; because I know that is all I am, even if I feel I am standing in my living-room [...] surrounded by a world wide as the world is, and that world oceaned in space, as alone in its orbit as I am in mine, however minor mine is” (*Tun* 467).

(2) The opaqueness of the world, resulting from the inability of consciousness to free itself from its own restrictions and to penetrate the veil of language, leads to a concentration of consciousness on consciousness, on the psychological subject (and the linguistic system); and this has consequences. When reflection directs itself not to the objects of the world “outside” but to the inner world, the subject becomes *self-conscious*. The outer sense as stimulation of consciousness is balanced by a sentiment of the self,

either of its power or its problems or both. By making the subject the object of consideration and thus by constituting a new self-reflecting subject, reflection distances consciousness and consciousness of the world from the self, a state of mind of which the self in reflection then becomes aware. Depending on the philosophical system, the formation, function, and value of self-consciousness are of course conceived differently. At the one pole is the *idealistic* notion of self-consciousness, at the other, its *pragmatic* understanding. Hegel is representative for the former, and Dewey is here taken for the latter. The idealistic stance has a *universalistic* frame of reference in the absoluteness of the *Spirit* to which reflection turns; the pragmatic position takes its viewpoint in the *lifeworld*, in the *practical* decisions and their problems. With Hegel the productivities of human reflection and self-reflection are not in themselves sufficient to ensure their ultimate value; reflection, the *process* of knowledge, manifests itself as insight, not in the illumination of limited objects and operations, but in a self-transcending reflection that is aware (even though only obscurely) of the final and convergent direction of all conscious acts towards Self-knowledge and Self-identity, which coincides on the whole, and in each of its stages with the ultimate reality it defines, which is that of the absolute Spirit. Consciousness

has risen to a religion for which the active universality, the Spirit which informs the teleology of nature and history, is also felt and pictured as a principle which achieves self-consciousness in a paradigmatic man, and, through the Spirit there present, in all men. What will now be achieved is *das absolute Wissen*, the perfect knowledge only consummated in philosophy [...]. For absolute knowledge is simply the realization that all forms of objectivity are identical with those essential to the thinking subject, so that in construing the world conceptually it is seeing everything in the form of the self, the self being simply the ever-active principle of conceptual universality, of categorical synthesis. In its conceptual grasp of objects it necessarily grasps what it itself is, and in grasping itself it necessarily grasps every phase of objectivity (Findlay xxviii).

While with Hegel the ultimate formal goal of consciousness, self-reflection and self-knowledge, define the human being in its essence, not its relations to the pragmatic world, with John Dewey it is the reverse. Reflection is not axiomatically concentrated in itself as a protection against the contingencies and vagaries of the world, and at the same time disengaged from the self as the absolute, self-reflecting Spirit, but rather it is first of all practical thought related to

the praxis of life. According to pragmatism, the life praxis is dominated by *action* as the fundamental anthropological category, and reflection is defined in relation to action. For Dewey “[t]he life of reflection is therefore secondary to the life of action” (101). Reflection comes only to the fore in problematic situations that impede action, and its task is to solve the problem. Yet, in addition to this merely instrumental concept of reflection, there is, surprisingly, another kind of reflection that answers to the “total problematic situation” of human existence (225). The “breakdown of habit” (99) turns into a total problematization of self-identity, which causes the loss of domination over the situation and as a consequence leads to self-alienation. But this loss of the fixities of thought can also create space for liberated self-reflection, the chance for the subject to come to itself in the act of reflection: “In this kind of thinking we discover the character of personality. No longer does ‘it’ think, but ‘I’ think” (48). Reflection is thus also in Dewey’s pragmatism the necessary medium for the constitution of the self; and the divergence, rather than the convergence of the self and the situation, establishes self-knowledge and self-identity: “And in part personality is the measure of resistance. I know myself as a ‘self’ by the obstacles I encounter. If ideas met no resistance in their embodiment in action, but were [...] immediate and instantaneous realizations, reflection would have no use and personality would have no existence” (50).

From Hegel to Dewey, from idealism to pragmatism to modernism and postmodernism, *resistance* against the limitations and contingencies of the world is the basis for the conceptualization of (self)reflection. It is in fact the basis for a humanistic understanding of the self since Descartes’s “cogito ergo sum”, who, however, did not focus on the (problems of the) self, which was only “filled out” as the central entity of consciousness by Kant, the Romantics, and the modernist writers, with or without denial of the dominance of the rational logic of thought. In the modernist, internalized novel, self-consciousness is cherished and sought for as the generator of self-knowledge and at the same time dreaded and faced with anxiety as the source of uncertainty, pain, and despair. The alienating effects of self-consciousness make the character conscious of the self-confining prison-house effect of self-knowledge, the fact that character-consciousness presupposes and cannot leave consciousness and knowledge. Radical self-questioning

limits the choices in the world, makes it difficult if not impossible to “live a life of clichés” (Elkin, in LeClair and McCaffery 117), resists the idea “that the exceptional life — the only great life — is the trite life” (Elkin, in LeClair and McCaffery 117), and has extreme difficulties in accepting the self and the external world unconditionally as sources of meaning without further enquiries into, and doubts about, what meaning is.

Postmodernist writers now turn the tables; they empty the rational logic of thought as well as the existential logic of pain, and they reject the factual logic of the “real”. With this last step, the blurring of the difference between reality and fiction, the expansion of negativity finally turns into positivity. Since the conceptualizations of reality and the unified self are revealed as fictions, the need to inquire into the status and meaning of reality and truth, to negate deceptions, clichés and fixed ideologies, to establish unity and authenticity of the self and at the end painfully to face failure in all instances, disappears, at least in theory, even if in praxis the longing for old unities continues to loom in the background and to color the narrative argument. Reflection and language, now separated from the identity-search of the self and from the “reality” and truth problems that the world used to pose, team up with the creative imagination in accepting the world as it is, or freely recreating it. A synthesis of mental activities is created that resists meaning as well as meaninglessness, but also powerlessness. The result is a self-liberating attitude that finds expression in what one might call humor, or rather, the comic mode, which re-orientes the world and turns powerlessness into power (this will be an issue in the last chapter). Elkin, using the term modern in a rather wide sense, notes: “It seems to me that there is only one modern joke: the joke of powerlessness. [...] The grand jokes of *A Bad Man* or *The Dick Gibson Show* — whatever I’ve written — are the jokes where the character in trouble, confronted with a force much stronger than he is, mumbles *under* his breath something that is absolutely devastating to the authority which threatens him. But the fact that he has to mumble it under his breath, you see, is what makes it funny” (LeClair and McCaffery 115). Humor and the comic mode call for energy under pressure, which is what Elkin, for instance, claims for his characters. He says of Boswell: “I like him because he has the energy of ego” (LeClair and McCaffery 120).

(3) In its third dimension, reflection fully comes into its own by reflecting about *itself as* reflection. In a philosophical turn, it seeks to clarify the preconditions and consequences of forms of sensibility, of the deduction of categories, of the structure of consciousness. It reflects about the questions of truth, value, and freedom, the attribution of certain kinds of ideas to certain faculties of consciousness (metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics). The reflective activity, in Gass's words from the *Tunnel*, proceeds "from things to thoughts of things, from thoughts of things to thoughts of thoughts" (253), facing ultimately "one's arena of empty awareness" (312). Reflection thus becomes infinitely regressive and many-layered by reflecting on the reflection on cognitive acts and further reflecting on the reflection on the reflection on cognitive acts, etc. Active doubt leads to ever further questionings of the preconditions of what was reflected upon before, and consciousness experiences its limits, the impossibility of knowing consciousness. Consciousness as object of interrogation is seen to have always existed before consciousness as subject of questioning; the latter has to undertake its examination in the pre-established categories of the consciousness that it reflects upon. This circling activity of consciousness is unsatisfactory, even unacceptable for the will to know because it makes evident the limit of human freedom; it restimulates the kinds of *feeling* and *desire* that transcendental reflection is meant to quieten, the feeling of frustration about the gaps of knowledge and the desire (turning obsessive) nevertheless to transgress the limits, to be free, a yearning that of course fails to attain its goal as long as reflection is focused on the self and on its autonomy as subject, as it is in some types of modern (and sometimes in postmodern) literature. The self-liberating force is not the existential self-questioning but the transgression of the limitations of the "real" and the self by the imagination. The created imaginary, however, is now double-poled. It creates and reflects on what it creates. The meta-reflection on art in postmodern fiction proceeds along the same course as does reflection in general. It advances from the artifact to the thought about the artifact to the thought about the thought about the artifact, etc., to the point where thought again encounters the limits of cognition, innovation, and perfection but can react to it with the freely tilting spirit of the comic mode that defuses contradictions and antinomies with the élan of play.

Reflection of course functions differently in philosophy than in narrative, though there is “a similarity — an analogy” (Gass 1996, 133). Philosophy strives for clarity and logical order and analyzes rigorously and comprehensively the workings of consciousness and its relations to the exterior world. Fiction, especially postmodern fiction, bases its concepts of consciousness and of the world on the findings of philosophy in a more or less direct way. But, in addition, it has to do its work in terms of the situational transformation of meaning; in other words, it has to operate within the situational context that the elements of space, time, character, action/event establish. This means that reflection in fiction is not only a theoretical but also a practical issue. Within the text it is part of the “story” or reflection with a number of constituents: (1) a *subject* that reflects; (2) an *object* it reflects upon; (3) the *process* of thinking; (4) its result, the *thought* and the limits of thought; and (5) the *aesthetic form* of thinking and thought. As we will see, emphasis can be laid on the various aspects of reflection to the detriment of others (though none can be fully deleted since they form together the “structure” of reflection in fiction). The motivation, starting-point, and non-transgressable limit of all transcendental reflection is the abyss and the void below the known. In Kohler’s words from *The Tunnel*: “beneath the surface of life [and, one might add, narrative] is the pit, the abyss, the awful truth, a truth that cannot be lived with, that cannot be abided: human worthlessness” (197). Hawkes says: “John Barth’s fiction has the enormous power it does partly because it is always positing nothingness, because it is so ‘created’ that it also insists on that which is vacant. To me this is frightening. [...] Out of the nothingness that is our context you create the fabulous” (LeClair and McCaffery 15).

Since humans cannot abide to face the pit, the abyss, the vacancy, they cover them. Neither thought nor the imaginary can change the facts of life, but the synthesis of imagining and thinking can fashion an *aesthetic* form of thought as a means of building a surface or of filling the void, without losing sight of it. In much of postmodern fiction, neither the subject nor the object of reflection is emphasized, but the other three elements step into the foreground: the *act* of reflection, the *thought* and the *aesthetic form* of the thought. The act of reflection often points in two contrary directions, the creation of *difference* and of *synthesis*, and the thoughts are



arranged in a formal pattern that combines *thesis* and *anti-thesis*. While modernist authors carry on the process of reflection with the clearly marked intention of attaining a result, a manner of understanding, or some kind of significance, and respond to the failure of this enterprise with disillusionment and despair, postmodern writers *know* that there is *no* ultimate knowledge, no single truth, no discrete reality, no significant identity. While modernists dramatize reflection by the dynamic tension between the character's lack of identity and its existential striving for it, for self-knowledge, authenticity, meaning, i.e., by a dramatic tension *within* character, postmodernist writers, having decentered the character-play with plurisignification, multiperspective, contradictions, and paradoxes *as such*, at least potentially independent of the interiority of a character and its conflicts; in other words, they dramatize reflection as if it occurred more or less *outside* the character on a matrix of ambiguities and contradictions.

Borges and Beckett are again, as so often, the forebears of the postmodern American writers. For their pattern of reflection, contradiction is the measure of truth. In the *Tlön* of Borges's "*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*", for instance, all "[w]orks [...] invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete" (*Lab* 13). Borges and Beckett operate in their texts with all imaginable variations of thesis-antithesis configurations. Borges's "*The Library of Babel*" confronts "everything" with "nothing". The Library that stands for the universe contains every conceivable book, "all that is given to express, in all languages" (*Lab* 54). Yet since the "total" book (54) is missing, though it is continuously searched for because it might be somewhere, the books "signify nothing" (53). In another paradoxical move, Borges's "*A New Refutation of Time*" defines time in terms of both the desperation and the consolation it causes, and makes subject and object exchangeable:

Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny [...] is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which

sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges (*Lab* 233-34).

Though the imaginary and the reflexive acts often follow different paths, namely those of construction and deconstruction, imagination and reflection combine. This occurs when reflection does not follow its own strict categories that according to Aristotle invalidate contradictions, but rather construes reflexive formulas that are contradictory and antithetical and thus are able to accommodate the free roving of the imagination. Activating its transformative, transgressive, and emancipatory potential, the imaginative act of reflection suspends conventional dualities like good-bad, true-false, real-fictive, and replaces the strict either-or thinking of Western civilization with an as-well-as attitude that fuses order and disorder, reality and fiction, truth and untruth to a new, non-rational, open-ended, fluid synthesis without closure that creates difference in the process of dissemination. Thoughts begin to float, to shuttle back and forth, and form their *own designs*. Without realigning themselves to the integrating instance of the subject, they in fact take on the nature of a model or gestalt of their own. Instead of forming a full “story” of reflection that is centered in the self and interrelates subject and object, other double-poled structures of the process of consciousness come to the fore. Reflective act and rational result (or painful disillusion), the opposition of thesis and antithesis, in fact form a self-sufficient *aesthetic gestalt* that, in the fusion of reflection and imagination, also fuses philosophy and fiction, epistemology and hermeneutics, aesthetics and ethics. By emphasizing (*non*)relations between contrasting thoughts and not so much their content, the thinking process develops thought “*situations*” of its own, as in Beckett’s texts.

In Beckett, the self is in a continuous, unsolvable, existential crisis that is filled with words, questions, and non-answers or manifold answers. They form a pattern that gains a status of independence. The subject might complain of it but cannot change it. Molloy, for instance, muses: “what do I know now about them, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things [...] and truly it little matters what I say, this, this or that or any other thing” (*Moll* 31- 32). Beckett has remarked:

“there’s complete disintegration. No ‘I,’ no ‘have,’ no ‘being,’ no nominative, no accusative, no verb. There’s no way to go on” (Bair 53, 400). Yet that is not quite true, as we know, because the characters in his novels do in fact go on. Yet the goal of reflection is no longer truth, probability, or credibility but the *surface* gestalt, or, in Beckett’s phrase, the “*shape*” of reflection achieved through the contrary arrangement of statements and positions:

I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English! Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned! That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters (qtd. in O’Hara 1970, 18).

What matters is obviously the *aestheticization* of the thinking-process between poles. The (masked) energies emerge in the formed gestalt, a special shape of thought-patterns. Their contradictions and fragmentations produce *absences* among them that, though they are built into every signifying system, are here emphasized by the hiatus between the figurations of thought. A silence arises that “says” what cannot be incarnated in words, what is outside the field of logic (and therefore also outside the system of language). The inconceivable, what Wittgenstein calls “the mystical”, gains space. Through the spaces in-between, re-enter feelings and values that form no logically defensible propositions but can only be represented in their “beyondness”, their being beyond “the system” and its self-absorbing rational limits. The gaps allow also the self, whose expressibility according to Wittgenstein is beyond language, to participate in the reflection-process with its *existential* (modern) problems of isolation and lack of identity. Barth, Sorrentino, Sukenick, Federman, and others, make this thesis-antithesis constellation and the production of gaps the structural basis of much of their fiction. They set art against the reflection on art, fiction against meta-reflection. In the process the one relativizes and contradicts the other, and yet both form a new unity in multiplicity, an aesthetic gestalt. Leaving behind the task of dramatizing the character and the limits of the thinking self, the combination of reflection and imagination strives towards a metalevel of “aesthetic liberalism”, which recognizes no pre-established precepts or rules but

attempts to reconcile the dualities by “transform[ing] the ceaseless tensions between the various modes of modern discourse into the conditions of possibility” (Cascardi 1992, 302). The counterstrategy to the shaping of thoughts in contrasting patterns would be to deconstruct these shapes of reflection in order to gain the shape of the *fragment* or the mere contingent piece of thought hidden in a stream of verbiage or in listings of imaginary “facts” (as in parts of Barthelme’s *Snow White*, Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, or Gass’s *The Tunnel*). Barthelme has become famous for the remark of one of his characters, who claims that “[f]ragments are the only forms I trust” (*UP* 153), and Federman, Sukenick, Hawkes and Gass can be quoted as making comparable statements.<sup>128</sup>

The de-emphasizing of both subject and object in favor of the process of thinking and the aesthetic gestalts of thought implies the risk of emptiness, of repetition, and exhaustion. Yet, as mentioned before, none of the elements of reflection — subject, object, thinking process, thought and (aesthetic) shape of thought — can completely disappear because each one is a constitutive part of reflection in fiction, and their (covered) interplay provides for variations, tensions and ambiguities. The difference between the postmodern writers can in fact be defined in terms of their different approaches, the accentuation, and combination or suppression of the varying elements of the reflexive process and its alignment with the imagination. But even if reflection is suppressed, it shows *ex negativo*, as “minus function” (Lotman), in the mood of the characters, as is the case in Barthelme, whose texts gain their vitality and ambiguity from this fact. The postmodern narratives analyzed in the following sections exemplify the function of reflection as a *method* of making or not-making sense, and as a *thematic issue* whenever its creative power and resourcefulness is tested in comparison with other mental faculties or attitudes. In the analysis of six texts, we will concentrate on those cases where, to quote the writer Lamont from Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, “[m]eaning is held in an almost unbearable tension on the dizzying edge of the meaningless” (47). A preliminary survey of the texts discussed may be helpful for an assessment of the role of reflection in postmodern fiction.

(1) In its most radically self-oriented form and function, reflection, confronting the self (or rather, the lack of a stable and unique self), expands to fill the whole interiority of character. Its

forms are contradiction and paradox, but its continuous process gives the subject a presence and saves it from extinction. The price to be paid is that reflection turns into a language-game with its own *gestalts*, and that in fact the self and its language become identical. Beckett is the obvious example. He has had an immense influence, especially on American postmodern writers, and in his radicality and transitory position between modernism and postmodernism, he offers a touchstone for the employment of reflection in the American postmodern novel. (2) In Coover's *The Public Burning*, reflection is for the main character, Vice President Nixon, the way to react to his ambiguous experience of the world. It is a creative force and serves to deconstruct the fixities and clichédness of the system of beliefs, while the subject that reflects, Nixon himself, is satirized and comicalized as the clownish representative of the system. (3) In Barth's "Menelaiad", reflection and rationality lose their dominance and structuring force in the struggle with emotion and mystery, in the definition of the self. Barth pushes reflection to the limit of the system (of logics, values, etc.) in a strategy of excess, extending the scope of thought beyond its "natural" borderlines into the sphere of love, but love wins, and Menelaus, the protagonist, has to announce failure at the end (the beginning of the tale). (4) The limitation of the role of reflection is visible not only with regard to love but also in the attempt to solve an artist's crisis of self-understanding, the crisis of the imagination to perceive and to create. Sukenick's story "The Permanent Crisis" sets perception against reflection, and perception wins. (5) In the system of human attitudes, reflection is the signum of civilization; as a productive power it both supports and questions beliefs and "truths" and thus keeps up a rational balance of various necessities. Yet it may also represent the evil and the "fall" of civilization; as a generator of complexities, of falseness, deception, dividedness, it is set against innocence, the body, nature and religious faith in an overall symbolization of human possibilities. Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* demonstrates that the human lot is the fall from innocence to experience, from living to reflecting about living. (6) In fiction, reflection occurs as artistic self-reflexiveness. As such it can choose two different routes. It either takes the form of meta-reflection: the narrator/artist reflects about the strategies of narration and the limits of traditional devices within the text, as in Barth. Or the writing act, the narrative process itself, is understood as an act of

self-reflexiveness, as in Federman. In all cases, whether reflection succeeds or fails in extending the known, in providing a synthesis, whether it is voiced by the character/narrator or turns into the self-reflexiveness of the fictional process, the rational principle of reflection (by coming to the limit of synthesis or failing at the limit), paradoxically introduces and promotes a new synthesis that is not a synthesis in terms of the rational and logical, but a disruptive synthesis of the incommensurable that includes in that which is presentable a “stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard 1984c, 81).

### **7.12.1. Grammatical Subject vs. Subject of Reflection: Beckett, *The Unnamable***

It is as if Beckett made a passage from Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China” his creative maxim: “The limits which my capacity for thought imposes upon me are narrow enough, but the province to be traversed here is infinite” (Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 1961, 81). Beckett radicalizes to the extreme the literary tradition that reveals the character consumed by self-analysis and its failure. Reflection in this process is existentialized and *de*-existentialized at the same time. This places Beckett’s trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* in a zone between modernism and postmodernism: modernism because the self (reflecting about the possibility of having a self) is the crucial target of reflection, postmodernism because the self is multiplied and dissolved in the stream of reflection that finally not only replaces the self but has to succumb to language. In *Molloy*, which has two protagonists, the mirror selves of Molloy and Moran, Moran wonders whether he has not “invented” Molloy: “I mean found him ready-made in my head. There is no doubt one sometimes meets with strangers, who are not entire strangers, through their having played a part in certain cerebral reels” (112). The logic of this process of wondering and reflecting while writing must lead, in Hugh Kenner’s words, “to that limit where the writing of the word now being written becomes its own subject. This is what in fact happens in *Malone Dies*, the man in bed writing about himself in bed writing” (79). *The Unnamable*, which has no definable setting, no chronological time flow, no actions, and no recognizable plot, is pure consciousness, i.e., reflection, carried on in the mono-

logue of the unnamed protagonist. The latter establishes his textual self, while the referential self almost disappears; and even the textual self appears to fade away into the inexpressible. It is a “thinking book”, “toying with parallels only to reject them, a self whose simultaneity is so radical that all sense of componency vanishes and ‘I’ is left facing the silence that is itself, as what is said steps utterly aside for what is shown and what is shown remains ineffable” (Kawin 277). The “I” turns into the words it writes, and the words turn out to be the “I” in an unending double-mirror effect that blurs the borderlines between self and language but at the same time makes this blurring of boundaries the object of reflection that cannot be sure about anything but its own verbal consciousness and the incessant movements of the mind. This self is compelled to think and speak on and on and at the same time to register meticulously the stream of thoughts and sentences and their failure to make sense. Waking from sleep, the narrating “I” questions himself right away at the beginning of the novel:

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on. Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, it wasn’t far. Perhaps that is how it began. You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again. No matter how it happened. It, say it, not knowing what. Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. But I did nothing. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed. By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking (293).

This is a pure case of possibility-thinking’s creating a design of questions and answers in the modality of “perhaps”. All three phases of ordering consciousness are abandoned or mutilated. The “productive imagination” (Kant) has lost its image-producing faculty; the causal processes of the mind are stopped or run empty; the aesthetic judgment has no concepts and objects that might initiate contemplations on the “faculty of form” and no “ideas” of (metaphysical) infiniteness (Kant) or absoluteness of the Spirit (Hegel) in which to rest self-reflection and satisfy the energies of the

soul. What remains of the sublime is the infinite as formal principle, reduced to the circling activity of reflection and its words; it rotates around itself and the emptiness of the self. In the performance of a continuous present tense, not bound by the past, by memory or by “facts”, the “I, of whom I know nothing” (306) pushes on to ever-new limits of apprehension, following its words in the vain hope to find an entry to its true self, waiting for a language to express the ineffable and for the silence to show himself the way so that he can stop his saying:

he is made of silence, there’s a pretty analysis, he’s in the silence, he’s the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can’t speak, then I could stop, I’d be he, I’d be the silence, I’d be back in the silence, we’d be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn’t been in story, it’s not certain, he’s in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn’t matter, the attempt must be made, in the old stories incomprehensibly mine, to find his, it must be there somewhere, it must have been mine, before being his, I’ll recognise it, in the end I’ll recognise it, the story of the silence that he never left, that I should never have left, that I may never find again, that I may find again, then it will be he, it will be I, it will be the place, the silence (417).

Wittgenstein’s notion that the self is the limit of the world and that “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (*Tractatus* 1961, 5.6.) is here put into narrative, a narrative that has mutated into reflection because the self cannot have and cannot find a story that defines it. Barth will later turn the problem around in “Menelaiad”, where Menelaus, continuously reflecting about love and identity, seeks and finds a lot of stories but no self. The Unnamable of course does not find the silence he is looking for; he must go on, though he cannot and does not want to go on. The novel, by emphasizing reflection for the presentation of the “I” and its situation, dramatizes the limits of self-consciousness, but it ends with a kind of dialogue between two selves that finally come together in the awareness of possibilities and in the necessity to speak of them and through them of the simultaneity of selves, in an unending, ever-failing self-analysis and struggle with silence. The result, however, is not a self of selves but the aesthetic gestalt of contradictory thoughts, the “*shape*” that reflection and language together create in a new synthesis. The synthesis paradoxically makes the “I” all-prominent as the subject of sentences, but diminishes its weight as subject of



existence and reflection in its own right in favor of linguistic patterns that take on a thesis-antithesis gestalt, and have inscribed in it the possibilities and impossibilities of thinking and writing the self.

[Y]ou must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on (418).

Beckett has perfected the method of addressing, in a continuous monologic stream of language, a series of questions to the self (in lieu of the missing occasion of genuine dialogue), and these questions are more than rhetorical tools. Beckett claims that his art has always been "pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric" (*Disjecta* 1983, 91); and Federman, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Beckett, notes that in the latter's discourse of "self-representation" the "shape will be an interrogation, and endless interrogation of what it is doing while doing it" (1975, 11). Interrogation, question, and paradox as strategies of reflection spread in postmodern fiction, for instance in Barth, Pynchon and Gass; they are the crucial strategies of self-analysis, for instance, in Coover's *The Public Burning*, Barth's "Menelaiad", or Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.

### **7.12.2. Reflection Against Belief: Robert Coover, *The Public Burning***

In a way, the narrative process in *The Public Burning* exemplifies what Vaihinger calls the "Law of Ideational Shifts" or the "Law of the 'transformation of ideas,'" which proposes "that a number of ideas pass through various stages of development, namely those of fiction, hypothesis and dogma and conversely dogma, hypothesis and fiction". While in this shift of positions one of them dominates, the other two remain as the "tacit framework" (124, 128, 124, 17). In contrast to Beckett, Coover's *The Public Burning* has a context of social and historical beliefs and "dogmas" that, though it partly operates in fantastic gestalts, is crucial to the book. The orien-

tation of reflection towards the self thus functions within a wider range of targets that refer to social values. The novel is about “the relationship between man and his invented creations” (McCaffery 1982b, 29), i.e., the systems of belief, which are deconstructed in the process of narrative and of reflection. The Rosenberg case, the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as Soviet spies on June 18th, 1953, is the historical subject of the book. There is a third-person narrator, but the center of reflection is Vice President Nixon, who is introduced into the novel as historical person and made to narrate the unevenly numbered chapters of the book. Nixon is the creator of the multiple perspective; he is both the confirmer and the doubter of the system. He represents the views of the media, the institutions, and power brokers, who turn all the familiar ideologies, myths, cliché patterns, and stereotypes into the “constellation of enshrined ideas” (161). This constellation of ideas and beliefs covers up the contingency of history with masked ideology, for instance the idea of the American Dream, which nevertheless is taken for the identity of the people. Nixon believes in the American Dream not only as something one dreams of, but out of personal experience (and, as other statements show, out of the necessity of believing in something): “I have the faith: I believe in the American dream, I believe in it because I have seen it come true in my own life” (295). In fact, the book shows, as Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* does, how difficult if not impossible it is for a character to face the consequences of the voidance of fixed centers; for “[r]aw data is paralyzing, a nightmare, there’s too much of it and man’s mind is quickly engulfed by it” (320).

Out of the book’s indictment of the American political and social system evolve narrative strategies that fantasize the world. The imagination’s power of image-making here runs parallel with the analytical processes of the mind. They both disclose, denounce, and deconstruct the closed system of references, deceptions, discourses. For this purpose Coover, in a kind of “gigantism” (LeClair and McCaffery 78) similar to that in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, makes use of multi-faceted, disruptive images, textual patterns, metaphors, and allegorical figurations, in addition to facts, dates, films, public occurrences, cultural events, in short, a range of encyclopedic details that reveal the disorder behind order. The narrative methods reject, ironize, and comicalize the corruption,

incompetence, dullness, and banality of political leaders and public figures, but also, and even more so, the simplicity of the public conception of reality, the clichédness of political communication, and the power of the media to form group-notions of reality. Not living processes count, but fixed “form, *form*, that’s what it always comes down to!” (91) and this form is untrue, corrupt, and dead. In a keen attempt at comprehensiveness, Coover is “striving for a text that would seem to have been written by the whole nation through all its history, as though the sentences had been forming themselves all this time, accumulating toward this experience” (LeClair and McCaffery 75-76). In the end, the “extravagant accretion of data suggests a system” (191) that determines life but lacks force.

In its cooperation with reflection, the imagination goes beyond the production of images. As a reflexive imagination, it designs fantastic images/situations that indict the shallowness of belief and thought as allegorical figurations. Personification of the press is one of the means of this procedure. The press in *The Public Burning* is the stabilizer and multiplier of the closed ideological system of beliefs. The power of the press is personified in the figure of America’s Poet Laureate, TIME, who, like the journalistic institution for which he stands, not only serves the public’s legitimate need for information and analysis of information, but conversely turns stereotyped beliefs into facts in “the vernacular wisdom of God’s Own Country [...] motherhood, apple pie, old Uncle Tom’s cabin and all” (Brendon 8). *The New York Times*, in a parody of Hegel’s philosophical system and central idea, is presented as “The Spirit of History” (188); it creates “a charter of moral and social order” (191). Yet, as Julius Rosenberg clear-sightedly realizes, the systemic thinking deadens life, “nothing living ever appears here at all”; there is only “that vast, intricate, yet static tableau — *The New York Times*’s finest creation — within which a reasonable and orderly picture of life can unfold. No matter how crazy it is” (192). The “keepers” of the *Times* shun chaos, “the terrible center, the edgeless edge. [...] No breakaway wildness, no terrible conjurations” (195), and devote themselves to ideological coverings of the void. The “natural” process of attaining knowledge is thus reversed in official America. It does not run from perception to reflection to beliefs, but from (false) beliefs to predetermined perception without reflection. The *Times*’s project is a “willful program for the stacking

of perceptions” (191), and its result is the deadening of reflection by belief, by *ideology*, which feeds on fixed belief and stifles the spontaneity and dynamics of the perceiving and thinking processes.

The world-view of the Eisenhower era, which is seen to be narrowly ideological, is mythologized on a meta-level into a fantastic Manichaeian struggle between Good and Bad, Light and Dark. The combatants are impersonated. One is Uncle Sam, personified as a Protean figure with clear-cut, healthy convictions representing the American National Spirit, who mysteriously incarnates himself into Presidents, in this case Eisenhower. The other is the Phantom, the “Creator of Ambiguities” (336), Uncle Sam’s impersonalized and immaterial, communistic counterpart who is said to strive for world power and thus to cause global mischief. In its vagueness, however, the Phantom is little more than an incarnation of “all what most maddens and torments, [...] all the subtle vinimus demonism of life and thought, that mysterious fearsome force [...] the darkness fearful and formless” (335-36) that waits in the void. The Rosenbergs remain insubstantial figures of the system, of its need for rationalization, dualistic structuring, and simplistic good-versus-evil world-view. Because of the ideological fixities, the question of their guilt or innocence cannot be given a careful consideration by the people, the press, or the judges. The central spectacle, the theatrical execution scene on Times Square, is fantasized into a huge circus show, a ritual of civil religion that is not so much concerned with justice and retribution, but serves rather as a substitute for “true” religion and myth and provides an opportunity for role-playing (the Rosenbergs playing their roles, too, “martyr roles they’d been waiting for all along” [135]), for sham public communication, mass identification, self-assertion, and, above all, public entertainment. In fact everybody plays “phony roles” in this book.

The clue of the novel is that the character who affirms all these clichés, indeed lives by stereotypes and owes all political success to them alone, namely Richard Nixon, is the same person who paradoxically liberates the reflection process, leads it back to its true purpose, to judge and interrelate perceptions and beliefs, and, finding them disconnected, to put the web of clichés in doubt and deconstruct it. He at the same time demonstrates that new thinking needs a new value-frame. If it is not society and its regulating forms, the only alternative frame of reference available is Life and its force.

*Society* and *Life* oppose and relativize one another. Coover places Nixon in the “vibrant space between the poles” (LeClair and McCaffery 72). The forms of society and the force of life suggest contradictory versions of history and society that withstand any easy configuration of synthesis. The book creates what Nixon sees as “a space, a spooky artificial no-man’s land, between logical alternatives” (136), a space within which Nixon feels that he and Julius Rosenberg “were more like mirror images of each other, familiar opposites [...] He moved to the fringe as I moved to the center” (137). Nixon in fact feels “a desire, much like theirs, to reach the heart of things, to participate deeply in life” (128). In lieu of dialogic communication for which there is no place in the novel, Coover creates a strategy of monologic reflection that centers on *questions* and a system of provisional answers that are again expressed in the form of questions, indicating positions that are relativized the moment they are uttered by counter-positions:

Were they [the protesters] all dupes? And the Rosenbergs? Who was behind them? Were they really as transparent as they seemed? Or were there strange patterns of depravity concealed behind the middle-class clichés of their trial testimony [...]? All these questions: [...] Why did I have to keep going back over this material, starting over, driving myself? I felt caught up in some endless quest, a martyr to duty ... but duty to what? My self perhaps, its creation and improvement, the need to show I had what it takes, that I *deserved*, no matter what I got (297).

Nixon’s reflections turn more and more away from clichéd thoughts towards perceptions of his own. They become the counterforce to preformed social and political syntheses: “I stared gloomily at the paper strewn across my office floor. Which was real, I wondered, the paper or the people? [...] the zeal for pattern. For story. And they’d been seduced by this. If they could say to hell with History, they’d be home free. The poor damned fools” (305). Indeed, “[w]ho was telling the truth, the Federal Bureau of Investigation or two admitted Reds?” (368) “Maybe the case constructed against the Rosenbergs had been a complete fabrication, beginning to end” (369). Nixon “recognized that there was something wrong with this black-and-white view” (373). Thinking about the reality of the Rosenbergs, he realizes that the death sentence has changed them: “what was striking about all their letters after that was the almost total absence in them of concrete reality, of real-life involvement —

it was all hyperbole, indignation, political cliché, abstraction” (305). The Rosenberg case initiates in Nixon thoughts about himself and the state of America in general that take on the form of the paradox. “My trouble, I thought, is that I’m an introvert in an extrovert profession” (331). As an introvert he is liable to think, while in an extrovert profession he is liable *not* to think but to believe. And he paradoxically not only complains about the fixedness of ideology but, conversely also about the lack of form: “Ah, why did nothing in America keep its shape, I wondered? Everything was so fluid, nothing stayed the same, not even Uncle Sam” (334). As always in postmodern fiction, it is not easy, in fact impossible, for the fictional character to attain a place in the middle, though that is the only place that could prevent the either-or attitude of a false ideological sense of truth and could gain a humanizing synthesis of values. This middle position is reserved for the author and narrator, for their irony and comic mode.

In asking all these deconstructive (and contradictory) questions, Nixon comes to the point where he faces arbitrariness, fictitiousness, and the *void* as the true givens. He asks himself what his political part is: “Was this to be my role? To urbanize the countryside and bring the wilderness back to the cities? To lead the New Revolution? To bring the suburb to all America?” (373) In all this he feels an “emptiness [...] so profound it was nearly a vacuum” (339), the reason being that, as he phrases it, “I *believed*. I thought” (346). This is exactly the paradoxical, self-questioning, “unhealthy” combination of contradictory attitudes he falls victim to: *believe* and *think*. His thinking in general and the critique of the system in particular waver between clichés and genuine inner disturbance and lead directly towards the instability of possibility-thinking: “The real crisis of America today, I thought sullenly, is the crisis of the spirit” (348); and “everything seemed double-edged” (359), “anything could happen. Or nothing” (360). But the reasserting spirit still comes back: “I believed in the American ideal of trying to do my best, trying harder, wanting to do good in the world, to build a structure of peace!” (361) Then again there are doubts, for “[i]t was as though we’d all been given parts to play decades ago and were still acting them out on ever-widening stages” (361). In a self-deconstructing process of reflection, possibilities multiply in a Beckettian manner. It might even be possible “[t]hat there was no author, no director, and

the audience had no memories — they got reinvented every day! I'd thought: perhaps there is not even a War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness! Perhaps we are all pretending!" (362) Consequently "what was History to me?" The atom bomb was "something like a hole in the spirit. The motive vacuum" (363), the void. The "truth for the world at large to gape at" is "that nothing is predictable, anything can happen" (365). Behind the consistency of fixed form appears as an alternative the disruptive force of multiplicity and change; both form and force are bound to the character's consciousness, but they at the same time appear as (abstract) positions, disengaged from the features of an individual character that is not only itself but also the habitat of different views and their power and struggle:

what emptiness lay behind the so-called issues. It all served to confirm an old belief of mine: that all men contain all views, right and left, theistic and atheistic, legalistic and anarchical, monadic and pluralistic; and only an artificial — call it political — commitment to consistency makes them hold steadfast to singular positions. Yet why be consistent if the universe wasn't? In a lawless universe, there was a certain power in consistency, of course — *but there was also power in disruption!* (363)

The questions that Nixon feels the need to raise and ponder expose him, like many other postmodern protagonists, to a labyrinth of signs, clues, and messages, and make him feel "like [he'd] fallen into a river and was getting swept helplessly along" (334). They are the important questions for the postmodern novel in general; they turn from self-reflection to acts of transcendental reflection and back to questions about the role of the self in the world, referring in the process to the dialectics of power versus freedom (resistance), role versus self, surface versus essence, reality versus fiction. Nixon expresses disquietude at the possibility that the system of differences is getting exhausted, that the contrasting poles of dualistic thinking might be leveled and thus the ability of orientation disappear. This brings him to consider a further possibility. He ponders the idea that human belief-systems may have attained an independent existence as ontological verities that are needed, cannot be changed, and have come to attain an (abstract) reality of their own.

This again motivates him to go a step further. He changes the viewpoint and attempts to make himself independent of the social value-system, a move which heightens the tension between the

reflecting subject and his beliefs. At the high point of the book, the clownish figure of the Vice-President who incorporates the social problems and ideological answers of the time — the fear of communism, angst and hysteria, and the need for scape-goats — and who is characterized by idiosyncrasies of thought and behavior, a lack of communication with his environment, a misunderstanding of people and events, who is struck with megalomania and paranoia, finally reflects about understanding, sympathy, and love, sets Life and Love against Society and Morals. In order to dramatize the direct confrontation of the value points, Love and Morals, and to guarantee the plurisignification of this encounter, Coover constructs an extreme, fantastic situation, a meeting between Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg. In one of the most bizarre and most comical situations of the book, Nixon tries to make love to Ethel Rosenberg in the prison and is then magically transported onto the stage of the execution in Times Square, with his pants down. Under these fantastic circumstances, Nixon addresses Ethel with his new insight, his realization that the central values are *Life* and *Love*; grabbing the prisoner in her death cell, a few minutes before her execution, he says:

“We’ve both been victims of the same lie, Ethel! There *is* no purpose, there *are* no causes, all that’s just stuff we make up to hold the goddam world together — all we’ve really got is what we have right here and now: being alive! *Don’t throw it away, Ethel!*” (436)

The depiction of the love scene is full of irony. Reflection ironizes action, just as action ironizes reflection, and both are comicalized by the perception of their simultaneity:

I felt I’d reached some new plateau of awareness, of consciousness, things would never be the same again, for me or for anyone else — how glad I was I’d come here! I jerked her hard into my body [...] I was out of my mind with the ecstasy of it! My head was full of poems and justice and unbelievable end runs. I saw millions of people running to embrace me. I thought: *I am making history this evening, not for myself alone, but for all the ages!* (439)

The sweet salt of tears mingled with the now-familiar taste of our lips. I thought: all strength lies in giving, not taking. I wanted to serve. We held each other’s hands. In this long chaste embrace, I felt an incredible new power, a new freedom. Where did it come from? Uncle Sam? The Phantom? Both at once? From neither, I supposed. There was nothing overhead any more, I had escaped them both! I was outside guarded time!



I was my own man at last! I felt like shouting for joy! [...] People are always sweating about their image instead of about loving other people. Why can't we all talk to each other, just say what we feel?" (442-43)

In this scene, which runs over a number of pages, Coover presents an entangled combination of genuine feelings, clichés, and ridiculous thoughts, of love and caring and egotistical self-enclosure, of serious endeavor and comic result. This conjunction of opposites is not only the key to Nixon's idiosyncratic character; it also says something about Coover's method of employing and dramatizing the discourse of reflection. Dramatic tensions are achieved by creating incongruencies among the elements that form the structure of reflection. The *clownish* subject Nixon is set against the *genuineness* of his thoughts; these *sincere* thoughts appear against the backdrop of the *clichéd* beliefs and corrupt hypocrisies that he continues to harbor. Nixon's obviously *personal*, spontaneous acts of thinking at the same time review *systematically* all the central questions that postmodernism has to pose. In a hilarious synthesis of opposites, this crafty and reckless power-broker *within* the system appears as a postmodern questioner of the basic traditional beliefs, arguing from *outside* the system. And, finally, there is the utter incongruence of a love affair between the American Vice President and the doomed Ethel Rosenberg — heightened in its discrepancy by the ill-suited place and time that Nixon singles out for his sexual approach and the expression of his love, the prison cell a few minutes before her execution. This scene points to a general postmodern disparity, the contrast between *genuine feeling* and thought and their (*false*) *discourses*, which are ironized. *Life* and *Love* are incorruptible realities in postmodern fiction, but they do not escape fixation and corruption through language and thought. This makes possible Coover's double strategy: to confirm Life and Love as values and to comicalize their discourses and also the reflecting subject that generates them. In the framework of narrative strategies, reflection in *The Public Burning* is the polarizer of the book, just as it is in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, where reflection is split into a narrowly rational, cause-and-effect oriented, "closed" style of thinking reified into the beliefs of the "They-System", and a kind of system-busting, "open" reflection that establishes the critical voice of the counterforce that forms an alliance with the imagination in the attempt to avoid closure (see also *The Crying of Lot 49*). Reflection

is one crucial weapon against what Federman calls “man’s obsessive need to construct artificial codes or systems with which he can conceal from himself the real lack of any code or system in life” (1973, 114). The other is the imaginative fantastification of the situation as medium of parody, satire, and the comic view. And the two, as has become obvious, can be combined into a means of plurisignification.

### 7.12.3. Love Against Reason: John Barth, “Menelaiad”

In Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, thinking is not a human force that turns against stereotyped belief and thus reveals the force of life, but rather it is the searcher for reason, the creator of form. The book, which is full of “[e]pic perplexity” (153), contains two stories that dramatize the phenomenon of love. One of them, “Night-Sea Journey”, was discussed in a former chapter under the aspect of the “absurd”. The other is “Menelaiad”, a masterpiece in combining *possibility-thinking* with *possibility-narration* while filling gaps of, and adding variants to, an established tale or myth, a method Barth further develops in the stories from *Chimera* or the novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody [i.e., Sinbad] the Sailor*, drawing for his material, for instance, on *A Thousand and One Tales*, Homer, and others. “Menelaiad” is the story of Menelaus who is obsessed with the question of why his wife Helen loves and has wed him when she had the choice of so many more glamorous men. In this story, love, the “[u]nimaginable notion” (150), withstands reason; feeling masters reflection, silence holds out against speech. The recounting of Menelaus’s obsession dramatizes the relation among the key-attitudes towards (human) life, between feeling and thinking, force and form. Love is the great mystery of feeling, of life, as is Helen, who caused the Trojan war, and reflection — Menelaus’s continuous question “why me?” — is the endless attempt to solve this mystery, endless because thinking here cannot fuse its two goals, analysis or difference and synthesis. The “fearsome mystery” (151) of love, or rather, of “being loved”, is the indefinable mystery of human integration within life, within its indissoluble unity; reflection, on the contrary, is the unremitting human attempt at division. Menelaus himself has “too much imagination to be a hero”, and his “problem was [he’d] leisure to think” (138). Thinking or creating endless

differences, is not enough to solve his problem, which does not allow for a logical end or final result, because love cannot be defined. Therefore he calls up his memory and his imagination, of which he has too much (or too little, depending on the viewpoint), in order to establish a system of (seven) interrelated stories, whose purpose is to answer his questions and “to hold fast to layered sense” (145) through the “cloaks of story” (140). Menelaus imagines that he tells the story to Helen (at three various times and places), adding and including further stories he told to Proteus and Proteus’s daughter Eidothea. These “cloaks of story” recall events and relationships of the past, which weigh heavily on him and in which his present state remains imprisoned.

The desperate cognitive and imaginative processes of Menelaus’s mind show all the traits of excess and contradiction: the extension of limits, the crossing of borderlines (towards the mystic realm of love), a rare combination of existentializing and de-existentializing purposes, the transformation of contrary positions, in Beckett’s manner, into the aesthetic gestalt of paradox — and all this in the hopeless attempt to attain the truth by separating reality from fiction, while love is undivisible, unrelatable, and therefore indefinable in discourse. The text is a play with continuous reversals that only an unusual number of longer quotations can document. The obsessive processes of reflection are correlated (ironically and comically, but also existentially) with the reduction of personal substance; that is, the thinking process (in a variation of the Beckettian manner) swallows up the thinker. Menelaus opens the story with the words “Menelaus here, more or less”; his “voice *is* Menelaus, all there is of him. When I’m switched on I tell my tale, the one I know, How Menelaus Became Immortal, but I don’t know it” (127). Stories, reflections, language have imploded what there was of him as a person. Driven by his “curious fancy” and reflective mind, he recounts where and to whom he asked the decisive question “Why me?” (150). He notes: “One thing’s certain: somewhere Menelaus lost course and steersman, went off track, never got back on, lost hold of himself, became a record merely, the record of his loosening grasp. He’s the story of his life, with which he ambushes the unwary unawares” (128). In the first frame of the narrative, in his palace many years after Troy has fallen and he has regained his wife Helen, Menelaus tells his story to two young guests, Telemachus, the



The next section (III) opens with Helen's paradoxical rejoinder:

“ ‘Snarled thwarted Helen: “Love!” Then added through our chorus groan: “Loving may waste us into Echoes, but it's being loved that kills. Endymion! Semele! Io! Adonis! Hyacinthus: Loving steers marine Odysseus; being loved turned poor Callisto into navigation-stars. Do you love me to punish me for loving you?” (157)

To make the confusion absolute: “ ‘Helen kissed my bilging tears and declared: “Husband, I have never been in Troy [...] I've never made love with any man but you” (157-58).

“ ‘Doubt no more”, said Helen. “Your wife was never in Troy. Out of love for you I left you when you left [for Delphi to ask the oracle, “Who am I?”], but before Paris could up-end me, Hermes whisked me on Father's orders to Egyptian Proteus and made a Helen out of clouds to take my place.

“ ‘ “All these years I've languished in Pharos [...] It wasn't I, but cold Cloud-Helen you fetched from Troy, whom Proteus dissolved the noon you beached him. When you then went off to account to Aphrodite, I slipped aboard. Here I am. I love you” (158).

This opens the puzzle of possibilities, an interfusion of imagination and reflection, of “fact” and fiction, in an unending division and layering of sense that turns the simple into the complex (which Barth says he loves), the serious into the comic, the reasonable into the ineffable. To Helen's question “Don't you believe me?”

“ ‘ “What ground have I for doubt?” I whispered. “But that imp aforementioned gives me no peace. ‘How do you know,’ he whispers with me, ‘that the Helen you now hang onto isn't the cloud-one? Why mayn't your actual spouse be back in Troy, or fooling in naughty Egypt yet?’”

“ ‘ “Or home in Lacedemon”, Helen added, “where she'd been all along, waiting for her husband”.

“ ‘Presently my battle voice made clear from stem to stem my grown conviction that the entire holocaust at Troy, with its prior and subsequent fiascos, was but a dream of Zeus's conjure, visited upon me to lead me to Pharos and the recollection of my wife (158-59).

The result of all these endless divisions/-possibilities/confusions can either be despair or laughter. Menelaus (and Barth) chooses a mixture of existential pain and comic mode. He “continues to hold on, but can no longer take the world seriously.

Place and time, doer, done-to have lost their sense” (160). What remains is change and metamorphosis:

Ajax is dead, Agamemnon, all my friends, but I can't die, worse luck; Menelaus's carcass is long wormed, yet his voice yarns on through everything, to itself. Not my voice, I am this voice, no more, the rest has changed, rechanged, gone. The voice too, even that changes, becomes hoarser, loses its magnetism, grows scratchy, incoherent, blank.

I'm not dismayed. Menelaus was lost on the beach at Pharos; he is no longer, and may be in no poor case as teller of his gripping history. For when the voice goes he'll turn tale, story of his life, to which he clings yet, whenever, how-, by whom- recounted. Then when as must at last every tale, all tellers, all told, Menelaus's story itself in ten or ten thousand years expires, yet I'll survive it, I, in Proteus's terrifying last disguise, Beauty's spouse's odd Elysium: the absurd, unending possibility of love (161-62).

This story clearly reveals Barth's creative procedure of multiplying perspectives. Abstracting from the concrete narrative process of the text, one can note the following: Barth takes a *mythic tale* as his subject, here the abduction of Helena by Paris and the subsequent Trojan War, and then *superimposes* his own story on the basic tale, filling out *gaps* that are left open in the account of the original story. This gap here is the reaction of Menelaus to the return of his wife Helena after the victory of the Greeks over the Trojans. In his own story Barth chooses a central theme, love, the most elemental, invigorating but also ineffable feeling that the human being experiences in his or her life. However, he not only gives an account of a specific relationship between man and woman but also problematizes *love*. Barth makes love an enigma and the mysteriousness of love the central problem in the relationship between husband and wife. The *riddle of love* is deepened by the puzzle of identity, which sharpens the feeling of uncertainty in Menelaus. This feeling of uncertainty raises questions about Helena's feelings and motives in marrying Menelaus in the first place, Helena having had so many better choices. Helena's inability or refusal to explain her feelings, her only answer being “love”, has a double effect. It exemplifies Wittgenstein's dictum that private feelings cannot be represented in language, which is always public, and at the same time it throws Menelaus into an existential crisis. Since reflection about the state of love cannot explain or even come near to understand this most existential feeling of synthesis, Menelaus recurs

to storytelling, in fact cloaks the phenomenon of love with multiple stories, without being able to clarify the mystery of love either through storytelling or reflection because one story always produces another and because one thought creates a chain of thoughts. The failure to overcome doubt and the crisis of identity causes Menelaus to lose himself.

Though this account gives only a one-dimensional report of what happens, it shows how Barth's narrative argument progresses on all levels, from the concrete, confrontational situation of dialogue to the philosophical problem and back to the situation, its deconstruction and reconstruction. In order to be able to do so, the author, in addition to superimposing feeling and reflection, mystery and explanation, dialogue and narrative, love and storytelling, writes in "irrealistic" (Barth) terms. He fantasizes all aspects of the story, a strategy which provides the opportunity to multiply the perspectives of narration and evaluation, existentializing and de-existentializing the crisis of love and identity, playing with it, ironizing character and problem, comicalizing Menelaus' behavior, mystifying love. The story finally turns into a situationalized poetological statement, making telling the story the only thing that lasts, not, however, without playing with and also ironizing this idea and again complicating the playful attitude with the pain of Menelaus, the narrator of his story.

#### **7.12.4. Feeling, Reflection, and Perception: Ronald Sukenick, "The Permanent Crisis"**

In "The Permanent Crisis", from *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories*, the contrast and interrelation of the mental faculties of desire, feeling/mood, reflection, and perception are again made into a programmatic, situated, poetological statement. Reflection is related to reason, form and self-enclosure and is posed against feeling and perception, which stand for spontaneity, body-consciousness, and direct participation in the life process. The situation here is a writer's suffering from artistic blockage and his attempts to overcome it. Writer's block isolates the husband/author from his environment and impedes his relationship with his wife. He is a man of thought, of self-analysis, "a self that could only analyze its own consciousness, a consciousness aware only of its own mutterings" (4). Reflection may

analyze his *feeling* of crisis but cannot understand or change it, since it does not operate on the same emotional level. The husband is in the apartment with his unhappy wife late in the evening before going to bed. In an attempt at understanding what has happened to him, he stares

at his blank page with an expression that looked like the mask of misery, saying to himself, it's like being in space so empty you don't even know whether you're there, trying to describe what was happening so it would stop happening, this paralysis, to call it a paralysis, because he would know what to think about it and more important, what to feel about it, and she came to the door of the bedroom and moaned (1).

Reflection here has no power of synthesis and integration. The reflexive analysis of the situation can only proceed in terms of negation and exclusion of possibilities. The protagonist feels something like “the loss of ambition no, like the exhaustion of desire no, more, as if he couldn't discover the forms for desire, or as if he wanted nothing because he could find nothing to want” (2). “[H]e had never really accepted being married” (2), “it had all been disappearing, his work, his degree, his career — not that they weren't still there, but that he couldn't see them, a death of interest — disappearing, disappeared, until tonight he felt he too could disappear” (3). The process of reflection leads him on, and he tries to find explanations, reasons for this loss of energy and hope: “Life is failure. Or if that's not true, that's the way I feel, or he wondered, did that sound hollow, what had he expected that the enlightened, liberal upper middle class wasn't going to give him, what life freer, larger than he had sensed since long ago beyond his home, beyond the reach of his family” (3). After acknowledging that the life of “immense possibilities he had been led to conceive” (3) in fact still existed for him, “he suddenly felt as empty, as tawdry, and above all, as pointless as the succession of stores [of his father] in Brooklyn only worse, because you would have to know exactly what you were doing to yourself, But why? she asked, Why?” (3) The sense of emptiness he feels cannot be analyzed; it is in fact “like a feeling of betraying something — but what? since there was nothing to betray in a society in whose forms and procedures he neither believed nor disbelieved” (4).



The turn-around comes when he remembers his grandfather's maxim "Live! Enjoy!" (6). He then finally changes from reasoning to accepting, from the values of society to those of *Life*, and indeed no longer thinks of what has disappeared and is missing. Instead of setting his trust in dissecting reflection, he begins to rely on unquestioning perception. Not thinking but only feeling changes feeling; the feeling of and trust in serial continuity saves him, the feeling that everything that happens is falling into place. And this feeling makes him open up to visual experience; he is able to perceive his environment and his wife and return to the immediate "truth of the situation" (Sukenick 1985, 25), from which he was separated by despair and reflection and their closure. In this movement towards the given, reflection changes into wondering, which is what Sukenick calls "experiential thinking", i.e., a post-logical and unpremeditated "process of cogitation" (1985, 132) that is able to provide the synthesis between the self and life. It lies in the acknowledgement of what is and has been and the openness to what is to come:

wondering why all this was coming together now, what he had done, was doing, noticed his wife nodding in her chair, her thick lashes veiling her eyes, wondering why it was all coming together what he had done, where he had been, the people, [...] how he had been alone in cities and something had always turned up, a friend or someone with a car and money always coming from somewhere [...] how there was always some other place to go and even something else to do [...] how it all came together and was a life, some kind of life, he saw his wife almost asleep sprawling in her chair a little childishly and could have kissed her [...] wondered why he suddenly wanted to kiss her (6).

Energy and trust in life return, which makes him realize that "if it's so tonight it might be so again tomorrow and if not tomorrow then the day after, and he stopped trying to figure it out, playing it by ear, listening to himself because there was nothing else to listen to and it sounded right he wondered why, as if he were a kind of artist and knew he was right but didn't know how he knew, he would have to write that down" (7). The answer to the problems of the artist is "improvisation again and again and never the same":

if it was pointless then it was pointless, if he was disintegrated all right he was disintegrated, he turned out the last light, because he knew this was going to happen to him again and again no matter what and all he could do

was try to sense what was happening and compose it like a man as he listens to his own voice composing ceaselessly, he would have to write this down all of it (7).

The circle of frustration, reflection, and acceptance/perception is what the title calls the permanent crisis that the writer has to face, and that he can remedy only by “writing it down”, by the spontaneity and improvisation of storytelling. This is an exemplary poetological story in that it lays down the artistic principle Sukenick believes in, namely that “[t]he mind orders reality not by imposing ideas on it but by discovering significant relations within it, as the artist abstracts and composes the elements of reality in significant integrations that are works of art” (1985, 171). It is something like Keats’s “negative capability” of perception, which stands at the beginning and end of both understanding life and creating relations in art. The question of course remains open as to how to get from perception and feeling to composition, from the concreteness of the situation experienced to the abstraction of relations and “significant integrations”. Sukenick’s answer is indicated by the course of the story and is stated in an essay from *In Form*: “[T]he form of the novel should seek to approximate the shape of experience” (207). This shape, however, is utterly indeterminate and unpredictable. Its form of composition is a spontaneous flow of the imagination resting in the present, of liberating improvisations, “a nexus of various kinds of energy, image and experience”; for “[a]s an activity, fiction first of all involves a flow of energy” (11-12), a flow of energy without a predetermined direction or goal: “Keep moving. Where? Nowhere, as fast as possible”(DN 62-63). The flow of *energy*, not the process of reflection is here the source, medium, and goal of experience and also its synthesis; the transfer of energy into fiction is the goal of narrative. Yet, as Sukenick admits in another statement, improvisation is not enough. Fiction needs not only force but also form. What gives the flow of experience form in this story and in other texts are the productive relations among different ways of relating to life: namely, perception, feeling, and thinking. Practically all postmodern authors are convinced of the key role of energy as the generating principle of both experience and narrative because it is the principle of life. And they all face the problem of how to complement force with form. The specific manner of handling this problem reveals the individuality of the writer.

### 7.12.5. Positions of Innocence and Experience: William Gass, *Omensetter's Luck*

*Omensetter's Luck* is also a programmatic story with a thematic core, which focuses not so much on the identity of a central character but rather on the function and value of the abilities of the human mind, perception, feeling, reflection, tested here under the aspects of innocence and experience, and their multiple interpretation. One of the first reviewers of the book called it "the first convincing fusion of speculative thought and hard, accurate sensuality that we have had, it is tempting to say, since Melville" (Gilman 23). Even if this were true, which it hardly is (James, for instance, comes to mind), the problem in *Omensetter's Luck* is not only the fusion of reflection and sensory experience but also their *opposition* in a design that sets civilization against nature, experience against innocence, thought against perception, the mind against the body. It thematizes these dualities in terms of the (unavoidable) human fall from innocence to experience. The book is organized around this thematic matrix.

Brackett Omensetter, who moves with his family to Gilean, a small town in Ohio and symbolically "the capital of human nature" (235), is characterized as a kind of prelapsian Adam by the naturalness of his behavior, animal-like ease, and lack of self-consciousness. He appears to the townspeople to be free of guilt and sin, to live without the burden and anxiety to which humankind is subject. The luck that he feels he has is the outer manifestation of this psychic state of innocence before the Fall, his oneness with nature, his living within a state of *perception* rather than in rationalizing (self)reflection or transgressing desire.

Brackett Omensetter was a wide and happy man. He could whistle like the cardinal whistles in the deep snow, or whirr like the shy 'white rising from its cover, or be the lark a-chuckle at the sky. He knew the earth. He put his hands in water. He smelled the clean fir smell. He listened to the bees. And he laughed his deep, loud, wide and happy laugh whenever he could — which was often, long and joyfully (31).

The reaction of the townspeople is split. Many have a sense of admiration and awe for his free spirit and his harmonious relations

with nature. Others develop envy and suspicion. Even the Reverend Furber, his opponent, notes that “*whatever Omensetter does he does without desire in the ordinary sense, with a kind of abandon, a stony mindlessness that makes me always think of Eden*” (126).

Around Omensetter are grouped, in an arrangement that demonstrates the systematic organization of the novel, the three other main figures: “the devoted chronicler, the worshipper, the opponent. All must see an extraordinary power in him, otherwise they could not stop to chronicle, worship or oppose”. These characters are also distinguished by their mode of language: “Tott [the chronicler] took on the responsibilities of narrative, Pimber [the worshipper] the responsibilities of the lyric, Furber [the opponent] those of rhetoric, and finally, since he is pivotal, the dramatic as well” (Gass 1969, 95-96). Furthermore, “each of the major characters [...] represents a different artistic type, and they are all bad as far as I’m concerned” (McCaffery 1982b, 225), the reason being that they are neither genuine nor one-sided. Gass further notes that he “chose to write about the kind of allegorical conflict that occurs particularly in the earlier literature in America, such as in works by Hawthorne and Melville”, (McCaffery 1982b, 225); i.e., he writes about the dualities and varieties of the complementary perspectives mentioned above.

The main conflict that is here interesting is that between Omensetter and the Reverend Furber. The latter represents civilization, order, and the church, and demonstrates in his psyche the opposition between mind and body, belief and disbelief, or reflection. Furber is trained in philosophy and theology and is a gifted rhetorician, but he suffers from an unsatisfied sexual hunger that causes him to wage within himself “a kind of Machiavellian war between Spirit and Body, which he equates at first with Good and Evil” (Schneider 13). While Omensetter’s purpose is “just” *living*, Furber’s is *belief* and *reflection*, supposedly mirroring moral and spiritual superiority. Yet in spite of his philosophical and religious speculations, “Furber literally has no real beliefs”, so that there is an unbridgeable “distance between his feelings and his actions” and a “contrast between his inner and outer life” (Gass 1969, 100). Reflection, revealing the truth behind his façade of believing, has become self-reflexive and self-destructive. It denotes differences but cannot create a synthesis between self and belief, or self and life, or belief and life, for his existence; his mental activities are too full of

contradictions, of posing and masking and uncovering these masks. His regressus ad infinitum sharpens and existentializes the conflict to the point of madness (a development that Coover avoided in *The Public Burning* in order to be able to use Nixon in various functions and under different perspectives):

Sometimes while he walked he would break into wild half-whispered words instead, and turn with open arms to the walls and leaves, his gaze fixed ecstatically on heaven, adopting the posture of saints he'd seen in prints [...] Or unable to stomach his own acting, he would turn to mockery. *Oh give us a dramatic speech.* And often he would oblige, charming himself with his rhetoric like a snake playing the flute (74).

The systematizing and contrasting of *faculties* and *attitudes* — recognizable already in the character-constellation, where it is employed for general thematic purposes that are no longer necessarily grounded in the self — point in the postmodern direction. The existentializing of life's antinomies in Furber's psyche, his suffering and pain, on the other hand, direct the book towards modernism — except that Furber, in a truly postmodern manner, cannot finally separate mask and self, reflection and rhetoric, which instead form an unholy unity. This failure to come to self-identity results in a split reaction to life and self. The failure of attaining authenticity of the self is not only a cause for the (modernist) suffering of the self. It is also the motivation for the converse, namely Furber's (futile) endeavor to distance himself from the self, from feeling and pain, by a postmodern kind of irony. Furber's divided response is recognizable in all his reactions to the world. Which position he takes depends on the viewpoint: innocence or experience, acceptance or rejection of life or a mixture of both. Meditating on Omensetter's game of effortlessly skipping stones over the water, "a marvel of transcending", Furber thinks of the joy it would be to escape the complexity of the self and to be such a stone "effortlessly lifting" (117) since the stone possesses no "knowledge", cannot sin, has no feeling of guilt — knowledge, sin, guilt all being the result of humanity's Fall. But then he equates such a stone- or animal-like existence, which Omensetter supposedly lives, with sin, concluding that Omensetter must be an agent of Evil:

There is everywhere in nature a partiality for the earlier condition, and an instinctive urge to return to it. To succumb to this urge is to succumb to

the wish of the Prince of Darkness, whose aim is to defeat, if possible, the purposes of God's creation[.] For the most part men look upon their humanity as a burden, and call the knowledge of what they are a simple consequence of sin. Men, like things, resist their essence, and seek the sweet oblivion of the animal — a rest from themselves that's but an easy counterfeit of death ... Yet when Adam disobeyed, he lit this sun in our heads. Now, like the slowest worm, we sense; but like the mightiest god, we know (175).

Furber's psychological situation, however, is further complicated. It includes the reality-fiction problem and the language-meaning opposition. As indicated, reflection stands not only against belief and innocence, it also faces the temptations of language and of words. By blending with rhetoric, reflection loses its sharpness, articulates itself only in words, has no consequences in life. Furber is "[f]earless in speech" but "cowardly in all else" (164), and he keeps "everything at a word's length" (182), erects "his beautiful barriers of words" (183) against living, against sexuality, joy, and love: "[Y]es, words were superior; they maintained a superior control; they touched without your touching; they were at once the bait, the hook, the line, the pole, and the water in between" (113). Even when he is sexually most aroused, he has "made love with discreet verbs and light nouns, delicate conjunctions" (162). Furber's change of heart occurs when Omensetter trustingly comes to him, his enemy, to tell him straight away that he considers him his friend, and to inform him that he has found Pimber's corpse (who has committed suicide because Omensetter could and would not help him to regain the "natural" state of innocence and inner harmony). Furber realizes that Omensetter has lost his unself-consciousness and has come to "know" his luck, which he thereby loses, making him a normal man fallen from innocence to experience. Furber then for the first time responds directly and honestly: "Where — where have you been? My god. My god. A friend. I've spent my life spreading lies about you" (190). In reflecting on his reflections and responding to Omensetter's humble remark, Furber bursts out: "All that matters is you trust me", making for the first time the effort to pronounce Omensetter's first name correctly: "What a godforsaken soul I have Ba — Brackett — what a shit I am" (191). This encounter finally returns him from thought and rhetoric to *feeling* and to *perception*, to active participation in other people's lives, which, he comes to see, are more important than abstractions.

This gives cause for another reversal of relations that also relativizes the position of Omensetter who, when his child is sick and near to death, refuses to call a doctor and trusts his luck that he in fact already has lost through knowledge. First of all, Furber, now genuinely moved by the child's sickness and anxious to do something, makes a confession of his sins. Yet with him even honesty is permeated with reflection on honesty, which results in rhetorical performance of honesty. He overblows "his vices so his charge would lack conviction. Was that not, admittedly, the maneuver of a monster? So often clever. Note how sweetly I pronounce her, musically wig-wag my ringalingling tongue" (206). But when he has finished, and sees Omensetter "set the stones in piles to form a circle" to save his luck magically instead of going for a doctor, Furber destroys the barricade and fiercely calls out against Omensetter: "I think you're a monster and you are proving me right ... I've been right about everything all along ... if only I had believed myself" (207). He admonishes Omensetter to go for help, repudiating at the same time all his own former beliefs, magic or religious, trusting only feeling and perception, which — and that is the unbreakable circle of the human lot — are, however, inseparable from thought: "You've got to go — there's no luck in this world and no god either" (208). Driving back with Pimber's corpse in a wagon, Furber thinks about what he has come to know about the fallen condition of the human being, in a dialogue with God and the dead man. Now the act of thinking joins with the act of genuine feeling in a situational synthesis, which is the most reflection can achieve in terms of synthesis. This ultimately cannot reconcile God and the world, nor innocence and experience, nor perception and reflection. Finally, reflection can only save its distance by employing irony and rhetoric to cover up the existential affliction with nothingness, the void:

Heavenly Father, You may call the soul our best, but this, our body, is our love. [...] How simply is our fondness for it guaranteed: we can't live outside of it, not as we are, not as we wish. [...] What power have You, if You can't continue us, and what cruel nature have You to refuse? The moist soul hangs about the body, too heavy to rise. How cleverly, Henry, you avoided that. Henry, listen, Omensetter was nothing, only another man. Now he is given to despair beyond any of yours. Well there you are — we all despair. [...] They are in despair and you're the one in luck. [...] We wish to be so like the dead, we living. But we shiver from the cold in

spite of ourselves, and we hate your liberty of lying like a stone enough to envy the birds who pecked your eyes. Most of all, we envy you — that you should open them unfeeling to their bills. My god! my eyes are every minute pained by what they see. I should take strength from being blind, if I were you. Vision is no kindly injury. [...] Why have You made us the saddest animal? He pushed himself off and felt the jar in his bones. He cannot do it, Henry, that is why. He can't continue us. All He can do is try to make us happy that we die. Really, He's a pretty good fellow (213-14).

The novel provides a chain of systematic but ambivalent deconstructions. Reflection destroys the (false) security of belief but is itself obstructed by rhetoric and “wordiness”. Feeling undoes the arrogance of reflection by activating the concrete situation of suffering against the abstractedness of thought. Life's condition denies humankind the synthesis of consciousness and of what might be called the unity of an authentic self, as well as a harmonious relation between self and world. Humans have only two choices: to perceive and feel, which means suffering and pain, or to think and escape into words and abstractions and, if that does not help, into (self)irony. Both Furber and Omensetter leave the town, which is, as mentioned, “the capital of human nature” (235). One does not need to add that here, too, the issue ultimately is not character but the confrontation of “abstracted” attitudes in concrete situations (the suffering of characters adding a modernist note that is also recognizable in postmodern texts).

#### **7.12.6. Self-Reflexivity and the “Voice of Language”: Barth and Federman**

Our analysis of the role of reflection in postmodern fiction comes to an end with a discussion of self-reflexivity. Self-reflection occurs in postmodern fiction in two radically different forms. On the one hand, it appears as meta-reflection in fiction, which “endlessly studies its own behaviors and considers them suitable subject matter [...] It is not art for art's sake, but *art about art*” (Shattuck 327). On the other hand, self-reflexivity does not take its position, as it were, *above* the narrative process, enquiring into its rules and problems, but *within* it. In this case, narrative and language generate self-reflexivity as they go along *without* a separate reflexive effort. Barth (who serves here as an example for comparison's sake) is on the one end of the scale, with Federman (and Sukenick) on the other. Barth's



stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* dramatize the creative process by reflecting, through the narrator, about narrative strategies, the difficulty of finding the right beginning or end, or about how to proceed in the middle, which method to choose (without coming to satisfactory conclusions about structure, detailing, subject-matter, the position of the narrator, etc.) or, quite generally, about the synthesis between reflection and imagination. In fact, Barth states that he is not interested in syntheses. Critical and narratological reflections like the following appear in many of his stories and novels. They identify, especially in the stories from *Lost in the Funhouse*, problems that refer both to the situation of the narrator and the situation of the narrated. They rise in the course of narration, putting in doubt that which he has written so far: “Overmuch presence appears to be the storyteller’s problem”; “one may yet distinguish narrator from narrative, medium from message” (“Echo”, *LF* 98); “There is no texture or rendered sensory detail”. “Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents? And it’s all too long and rambling” (“Lost in the Funhouse” 85, 88); “Beginning: in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionlessness, abstraction, pro, dis. And it will get worse. Can we possibly continue?” (the opening of “Title”, *LF* 102); “one afternoon the possibility would occur to the writer of these lines that his own life might be a fiction, in which he was the leading or an accessory character” (“Life-Story”, *LF* 113).

Convinced that existence of the self is exclusively existence in the spontaneity and self-evidence of the language-process, Federman goes the opposite way; he places self-reflexivity primarily in the process of writing, in language, and in typographical and graphic arrangements. He wrote his dissertation on Beckett, published as *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett’s Early Fiction*, and he has said that Beckett had a powerful influence on his own work. He notes: “This is the essential question, the central idea of Beckett’s work — a question that all human beings should ask themselves, [...] What the fuck am I doing here in this life? My own writing is always about that” (LeClair and McCaffery 134). What attracts Federman in Beckett is that the Beckettian hero pursues “an epistemological quest whose purpose is not the discovery of some philosophical or psychological truth, but the negation of all concepts formulated by

man to rationalize his existence” (1965, 57-58). Yet Federman also sees limits in Beckett, namely that he “closed it [his dead world] for us. After Beckett there is no possibility of writing about the world again, at least not that old dying world” (LeClair and McCaffery 138). The postmodernist writer, however, would want to use the *positive* potential that Federman sees in Beckett’s protagonists: “[T]hough they are aware that they will never win, they also know that they cannot lose either, which provides them with a ground for affirmation in this negative plight, with a rationale for their ‘fidelity to failure’” (Kutnik, *Novel of Performance* 154). Yet with Federman, the positive potential lies not in the heroes but in *language*. He writes in *Surfiction* that

no meaning pre-exists language, but that language creates meaning as it goes along, [...] as it progresses, then writing (fiction especially) will be a mere process of letting language do its tricks. To write, then, is to *produce* meaning, and not *reproduce* a pre-existing meaning. To write is to *progress* and not to remain subjected (by habit or reflexes) to the meaning that supposedly precedes the words (8).

Fiction is thus performatory, and as such it is “self-reflexive”. Here self-reflexivity is a characteristic of language. But since the performance of language calls up a subject (just as the subject, being a “word being”, is only manifested by language), the self-reflexivity of the text is also the self-reflexivity of the subject. (We might remind ourselves at this point of the fact that the constitutional form of narrative is the situation and that the most important constituent of the situation is the character, the self, the subject, even if it is a self- and text-performing self.) For Federman, “the essence of a literary discourse [...] is to find its own point of reference, its own rules of organization in itself, and not in the real or imaginary experience on which it rests” (1981b, 30-31). But there is still the performing self, placed within the self-reflexivity of the text. The self of his fiction Federman calls the “Present-Self”, or the “Grammatological Self” — no longer a Self which is a reproduction or a representation of a PAST-SELF, but a Self which invents itself in the present of the text, which improvises itself extemporaneously as the text is written” (1979-80, 52). And this new self “is usually presented [...] as a disembodied subject which functions as a pure voice (or in some cases as a multi-voice which dispersed the

centrality of the pronominal Self) and which *performs* the text rather than being *performed* by the text, and thus becomes a Self-performing-Self” (Federman 1981a, 198).

The reader participates in the performance of this self intellectually, emotionally, and physically. The author wants “to give the reader a sense of free participation in the writing/reading process, in order to give the reader an element of choice (active choice) in the ordering of the discourse and the discovery of its meaning” (Federman 1975, 9). The self-reflexivity of language — including typographical intervention that interrupts the linearity of reading and would thus liberate the reader from a fixed relationship with the text — thus leads to a self-reflexivity in the reader (In *Double or Nothing* each page is typographically different from all the others). In the new spontaneous, unpredictable — in fact perceptual, not causally reflective — “fictitious discourse”, the

elements will now occur simultaneously and offer multiple possibilities of rearrangement in the process of reading [...] It will circle around itself, create new and unexpected movements and figures in the unfolding of the narration, repeating itself, projecting itself backward and forward along the curves of the writing. [...] The shape and order of fiction will not result from an imitation of the shape and order of life, but rather from the formal circumvolutions of language as it wells up from the unconscious (Federman 1975, 11).

Self-reflexiveness now refers to all three: author, text, and reader. The text is “a process of self-cancellation” (Federman 1977, 110) and self-installation: “to write a novel is not only to tell a story, it is to confront the very act of writing a novel” (LeClair and McCaffery 148), which is again a confrontation with the writing self (and the other) and as such an act of self-reflection and reflection on the self. The “Present-Self “of the text “invents its own reality, its own unpredictable being, and even its own fictitious past. It may even re-invent its author who then becomes as fictitious as his creation” (Federman 1979-80, 53). The author and the reader, creating meaning by the verbal performance of experience, are self-reflexive in this process and gain self-understanding: “The more you write [...] the better you stand a chance of understanding what you are doing and who you are [...] In a way, it is because I *can't* find it that I keep looking for it” (LeClair and McCaffery 143). Federman furthermore notes: “in a sense all my fiction is trying to come closer

to the truth of my own self by writing myself into existence” (LeClair and McCaffery 149). By making the text “deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, nonsequitur, and incoherent” (Federman 1975, 13), the reflecting subject, the object of reflection, the act of reflection, and its rational content disappear into linguistic performance, which, however, mysteriously reproduces a subject for itself, for the author and the reader, and also a synthesis as the creative result, which neither the self nor the world nor the combination of the two but only language as self-reflexivity can seemingly provide. Yet this complication is not a cause of despair, as it is for Beckett. It is rather a proof of energy, and energy is in fact the generating principle for creativity in which the reader is to participate. In addition to Federman, Robbe-Grillet and Sukenick have also stated that the novel has a didactic function, namely to teach self-liberating creativity, the creation of one’s own worlds. Since “the act of composing a novel is basically not different from that of composing one’s reality [...] the main didactic job of the contemporary novelist is to teach the reader how to invent his world” (Sukenick 1975, 41).<sup>129</sup>

### **7.13. The Minimalistic Program: Behavior and the Diagrammatic Method**

“Behavior” in our sense is not to be confused with what has been termed in psychology Behaviorism. The latter flourished in the first half of the twentieth century as a reaction to the introspective psychology of Wundt, James, Titchener, and others, and it emphasized what is considered to be “objective” and can be observed. Though such an “outside”, quasi-objective (in fact non-objective) view on behavior (and perception) is often characteristic of the narrative strategy of postmodern fiction. This simplifying strategy is meant to be deceptive and is set against a more complex view even if the latter appears as an empty space, as we will see. In our context, behavior first of all defines itself by its difference from other attitudes. It is distinguished from “perception”. Though behavior includes perception, and perception is directed toward observing behavior as an object, in the presentation of the narrated situation the behavior-perspective differs from that of perception by the accentuation of a more “factual” attitude toward what is seen or

imagined. It is not interested in introspection, and it excludes emotion and thought from the presentation of the situation. And it is contrasted to action. Behavior is defined as subconscious, unwilled, routinized, and not self-controlled, in contrast to “action”, which is conscious, self-willed, and self-controlled. There are doubtless problems of attribution and transition, but at the ends of the scale, the two notions form heuristically useful distinctions, especially for postmodern fiction, which contains little action or only disoriented, fragmented or fantasized action, but a great deal of physical and agential behavior.

Yet behavior stands not only in contrast to the full program of consciousness and to action, it is also closely related to them. In fact, behavior can be considered as the reduction and even antiform of (the freedom of) action.<sup>130</sup> As a reductive form of action, it can indicate an automatization of (praxis-oriented) action. It dissolves the active role of the character, concentrates on the result of what happens, and gives actor and action the characteristics of something seen from outside, of an *event*. Behavior is also the reductive form of emotion and thought and the inner view, which is the result in postmodern fiction of the decentering of character as subject and object of the narrative argument. And in general psychological terms, behavior is the reduction of and replacement for motivation and traditional character-analysis. Sukenick, for instance, says: “The idea of motivation itself may have decayed as a persuasive concept [...] So it has seemed more fruitful for me as a novelist to concentrate on behavior [...] for a whole lot of reasons the notion of depth psychology and Freudian motivation doesn’t interest me much”. And behavior is the antidote against “the illusionism that a lot of writers of my generation are fighting against” (LeClair and McCaffery 296, 297). The reduction of character to behavior implies that, because of the impossibility of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, meaning cannot be deciphered in terms of introspection (and action). It is instead restricted to the surface, dependent on observable physical, agential, and linguistic behavior. This emotional and intellectual minimalism is widespread but has not always been applauded. Gass, for instance, finds a “fear of feeling” in the texts of a number of postmodern writers, i.e., Hawkes, Barthelme, Coover, Barth, Nabokov, Borges, who “neglect the full responsive reach of their readers” (Bellamy 1974, 34). He adds: “My complaint about

Barth, Borges, and Beckett is simply that occasionally their fictions, conceived as establishing a metaphorical relationship between the reader and the world they are creating, leave the reader too passive” (35).

In praxis, the recording of behavior in fiction relates facts and tends to a *diagrammatic* style that is reductive, but also conclusive and assertive since it concentrates on the factual. The description of behavior, also fantastic behavior, is often emptied of pictorial details and leaves out the dynamics of time, process, and transition. In such a case, the representation of the narrated situation is often reduced to a visual and linguistic minimum, for instance to subject, verb, object. Yet though the diagram is a static and depleted form, seemingly complete and finite in itself, with the subject left outside (see Serres 39), it contains, and even heightens all the tensions between stasis and dynamis, immobility and mobility, by its fixing the moment in an “abstracted” form. Foucault, as Deleuze points out, sees in the diagram a strong tension between form and force: “The diagram, as the fixed form of a set of relations between forces, never exhausts force which can enter into other relations and compositions. The diagram stems from the outside, but the outside does not merge with any diagram” (Deleuze 1988, 89). Tensions also emerge in the interconnection of diagrammatic situations, which is again diagrammatic. The single, diagrammed episode is often isolated and disconnected and has no personal, logical, temporal, or spatial links to the preceding or to the following situations. Yet all texts are intentional, initiate suppositions, cognitive states and feelings, in short, activate the psychological code, whether it is represented as such or not. Thus the gaps that the diagrammatic method leaves are filled. Postmodern minimalism here radicalizes modern strategies, for instance Hemingway’s “iceberg technique” (with one-eighth of the narrative argument above ground and the other seven-eighths hidden under the surface). As Iser notes, “[i]t is typical of modern texts that they invoke expected functions in order to transform them into blanks” (1978, 208). Jurij Lotman speaks in this context of a “minus function” (145).

### 7.13.1. The Diagrammatic Method and Postmodern Satire: Donald Barthelme

The programming of behavior and the concomitant narrative style of the diagrammatic method are features of a minimalistic strategy that may be contrasted to the maximalistic one, for instance of Barth and Pynchon. One is reminded of Thomas Wolfe's categorization of writers as "putter-inners" and "leaver-outers", a distinction which he employs, for his own defense, in a letter to Scott Fitzgerald (*Let* 643), and which Ronald Sukenick and Stanley Elkin apply to postmodern fiction.<sup>131</sup> Having studied existential philosophy, Barthelme is familiar with the concepts of angst and alienation, identity and authenticity, but he also knows that all endeavors at unity, wholeness, and permanence are condemned to failure. Strong emotions belong to the past and are in fact no longer called for or wanted. This reductionist method is quite different from the modernist rejection of the direct expression of feeling. T. S. Eliot wrote: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion" (1934b, 21). The modernist counter-reaction against Romantic emotionalism and Victorian melodrama and sentimentality was a result of the aversion against nonformal synthesis, harmonies, and happy endings, which were considered trivial. If modernist writers express feeling, it is not joy but pain. According to Adorno, "conscious unhappiness is [...] the one authentic dignity it [the mind] has received in its separation from the body". For the modernist writer, the question that poses itself is not that of having emotions or not, but *how* to express them. The answer is again formulated by T.S. Eliot: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative;' in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (1934a, 145).<sup>132</sup> For the postmodernists, the problem is not only how to express emotion. They doubt the ability of language to express emotion and anyway feel ambivalent about the place and role of emotions. Yet emotions belong to the psychological code that always lies in wait, expressed or not, as we saw, for instance, in Robbe-Grillet's case, and these actions can be activated by the reader. Planned or unplanned, all presentations of

character and situation also express or suggest emotion, but now not by “objective correlatives” in the modern sense, as something present, but as absence, as *gaps*, and *blanks*, as *emptiness* and the *void*. Gaps and the void do not define the emotions but they suggest their presence even though they “disseminate” (Derrida) them. If emotion appears on the surface, it is enclosed in discourses that attenuate, pluralize, ironize, or comicalize it. Barthelme is a striking example of how traditional forms of thinking, feeling, and desire are deconstructed, while their foundational energy and force are preserved in the gaps among incongruities, where they appear as presence in absence.

In “A Manual for Sons” from *The Dead Father*, Barthelme develops a program of “attenuated form” for emotion, desire, and action. It is supposed to fill or to cover the ever-present gap and to mediate between authoritative, repressive fatherhood and the chaos of fatherlessness, and reduce the world to smaller stories and weaker actions. This attenuated form corresponds to Barth’s “weaker” as-if behavior and as-if realities in “Anonymiad”, and Vattimo’s proposition of “weaker” thoughts. The novel and the Manual within the novel thematize strength versus weakness, and bigness versus smallness. The program of attenuation, however, is, as everything in Barthelme, presented in an ambiguous way and tinged with irony:

Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities [committed by your father] touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving toward a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers. Your contribution will not be a small one, but “small” is one of the concepts that you should shoot for [...] Begin by whispering, in front of a mirror, for thirty minutes a day. Then tie your hands behind your back for thirty minutes a day, or get someone else to do this for you. Then, choose one of your most deeply held beliefs, such as the belief that your honors and awards have something to do with you, and abjure it. Friends will help you abjure it, and can be telephoned if you begin to backslide. You see the pattern, put it into practice. *Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least “turned down” in this generation* — by the combined efforts of all of us together (DF 179-80).

This program of “attenuation” is put to work in Barthelme’s texts with a “factual” attitude and a diagrammatic method of



representation that leaves discontinuities and gaps where emotion and desire could or should have had their place. Leaving out the dynamics of time, the reporting-the-facts-method reduces the presentation of the narrated situation to visual lists that lack an integrating instance, a perceptual and conceptual point of reference, and use a linguistic minimum. (As mentioned, one of Barthelme's characters claims that "fragments are the only forms I trust" [*UP* 153].) An example of the diagrammatic method that does not belong to the extreme cases of fragmentation and thus shows a rather typical specimen is the description of the dwarfs' concern about their deteriorating relation to Snow White in the novel of the same name:

"She still sits there in the window, dangling down her long black hair black as ebony. The crowds have thinned somewhat. Our letters have been returned unopened. The shower-curtain initiative has not produced notable results. She is, I would say, aware of it, but has not reacted either positively or negatively. We have asked an expert in to assess it as to timbre, pitch, mood and key. He should be here tomorrow. To make sure we have the *right sort* of shower curtain. We have returned the red towels to Bloomingdale's". At this point everybody looked at Dan, who vomited. "Bill's yellow crêpe-paper pajamas have been taken away from him and burned. He ruined that night for all of us, you know that". At this point everybody looked at Bill, who was absent. He was tending the vats. "Bill's new brown monkscloth pajamas, made for him by Paul, should be here next month. The grade of pork ears we are using in the Baby Ding Sam Dew is not capable of meeting U.S. Govt. standards, or indeed, any standards. Our man in Hong Kong assures us however that the next shipment will be superior. Sales nationwide are brisk, brisk, brisk. Texas Instruments is down four points. Control data is up four points. The pound is weakening. The cow is calving. The cactus wants watering. The new building is abuilding with leases covering 45 percent of the rentable space already in hand. The weather tomorrow, fair and warmer (119-20).

Barthelme's narrative strategy is to take up the conventional characteristics of shorter fiction, its concentration on crises, conflicts, and issues and then, so to speak, reverse this outline by treating the force of the crises and conflicts unemotionally, without recourse to a center, a focus, a value-system, the identity-concept of character, or, for that matter, a recognizable narrator, who here decomposes into an anonymous voice or several unidentifiable voices. The principles of coordination are *collage* (its deconstruction of traditional arrangements and connotations) and *montage* (of new artificial connections and abrupt juxtapositions). In this way, the text produces a

“derealization”, a “simplification” and “mechanization” of situations and contexts. Presented is an unconnected series of abstractly and expositoryly factual statements. They resist any hierarchical, contextual, or “humanizing” organization and exclude all interiority. But in this diagram of the situation, which negates the familiar processes of the mind, are inscribed *ex negativo* the unexpressed feelings and desires, the defeat of emotional contact and satisfaction, as “minus function” (Lotman). As in the case of Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* (see, for instance, the passage in which the husband observes his wife as she is brushing her hair) and in other cases of narrative minimalism, the psychological code is abstracted, but returns under cover as intention to fill/suggest the void.

The psychological code and the force of instincts and conflict in Barthelme appear as intention behind the disjointed facts; this always present code, whether articulated or not, sketches a *self* behind the façade, suggests emotions, desires and thoughts, and the lack of communication between isolated individuals. However, thoughts and emotions are also directly addressed in matter-of-fact language, in a kind of expository discourse of juxtapositions that leaves gaps and pluralizes the perspectives on feeling. In the words of a character from *Snow White*: “After a life rich in emotional defeats, I have looked around for other modes of misery, other roads to destruction. Now I limit myself to listening to what people say, and thinking what pambly it is, what they say. My nourishment is refined from the ongoing circus of the mind in motion. Give me the odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall, and I will be content” (*SW* 139). The “emotional defeat” is caused by the fact that the “Goals [are] incapable of attainment”. These goals, the striving for faith, identity, and satisfaction, “have driven many a man to despair”. In fact, “despair is easier to get than that — one need merely look out of the window, for example” (*Am* 109). But one knows that defeat and despair are nothing new, and that there is no reason for excitement about alienation. The title of a later collection, *Sadness*, describes what one might call a state of muted, inner disturbance. It fits Barthelme’s most typical works of the Sixties and Seventies, and is, as it were, the response to the land of “Brain Damage”, to use the title of one of his stories from *City Life*.

The attenuation of the emotion that fills the gaps between abrupt juxtapositions or is expressed nonchalantly as something

given lets the narrative attitude appear as a general *mood*, a mood of irritation, confusion, or resignation. The lack of psychological integration and social values in the text makes it impossible to fuse perception, emotion, desire, and thought into a coordinated personal experience and to give the experience intensity, direction, and meaning. Feelings are strangely disconnected from the logic of character and the logic of the narrated situation, and they appear to be somewhat free-floating, not as experienced emotions but abstracted as emotive “*ideas*” of loss, lack, and alienation, or of sympathy, concern, and love. This is the reason that they can be pronounced as such and at the same time ironized and satirized by contrastive linguistic fields that reflect the disintegration of emotion and desire, belief and thought. Thus, Paul reflects in *Snow White*:

I have loftier ambitions, only I don't know what they are, exactly. Probably I should go out and effect a liaison with some beauty who needs me, and save her, and ride away with her flung over the pommel of my palfrey, I believe I have that right. But on the other hand, this duck-with-blue-cheese sandwich that I am eating is mighty attractive and absorbing, too (27-28).

A surplus of clichéd notions and language formulas that are “dead”, historical ballast, mere form without force, appears to weigh — and not to weigh — upon the characters and the narrators who are imprisoned within a behavior that is stymied by the antagonism between, on the one hand, the ideas of the extraordinary, i.e., the old belief in heroism or the modern notions of existential alienation and pain, and, on the other, the “ordinary” life of small irritations and satisfactions, between the rejection of the ordinary routine and its acceptance. It is as if the lack of orientation assembles and opposes contradictory discourses that seem to colonize the characters and make them and their behavior passive reflectors of contradictory possibilities expressed in language.

The diagrammatic method of reducing images to facts and of registering and juxtaposing disconnected items also leads to a forceful shifting and mixing of viewpoints, and facilitates the overlay and the interaction of the satiric, ironic, parodic, playful, and comic modes that all build on a pattern of incongruities, out of which the force of multiperspective emerges. This superimposition of evaluating attitudes is the logical result of the encumbrance of rational

thought. Its restriction or loss of validity leaves open and makes necessary various possibilities of interpretation of equal validity. The interaction of evaluative perspectives has as a moral starting point the *satiric* mode, and, as its end point, the comic perspective, with irony, parody, and play as modes of mediation. Here one can speak again of a program of attenuation, of disseminating or deferring one perspective into the other. There is quite obviously a satirical note in Barthelme's texts. But satire is dialectic, needs a deformation and a value-pole, and this clear-cut opposition of value and non-value is suspended in postmodern fiction. Thus satire's indictment of fixities and definites (Coleridge) is muted by Barthelme, just as is the expression of emotion. He himself notes that he does not write satire: "Social satire is of minor importance in the world, but also in what I do — I am of an ironic turn of mind". The reason for his rejection of satire is that "[i]t's a destructive attack on its object" (Ziegler and Bigsby 45, 53).

Instead of the seemingly destructive method of satire, Barthelme prefers parodies of language: "I enjoyed writing them because I've always admired the form at its best" (Bellamy 1974, 48), and, one might add, because he has ironized form at its clichéd worst. Thus satire is attenuated into irony and parody. Yet irony is also muted. In Barthelme's short story "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" a dialogue runs as follows: "A: But I love my irony. Q: Does it give you pleasure? A: A poor ... A rather unsatisfactory" (CL 92). Barthelme himself comments on the function of irony in this story: "irony is equated with masturbation [...] My conception of what the story says is that irony is, finally, of not much use" (Ziegler and Bigsby 46). When satire and irony are muted, space is created for parody, play, and the comic mode, which may be considered as attenuations of the stricter perspectives of negativity, satire and irony, and their forms. The comic mode, all-present in postmodern texts, aims at a "positivization of negativity" (Warning); it unburdens, distances itself from norms, demands, rules, the domination by the terrible and the absurd, and from the non-commitment of play, the immanence of parody, and the mere aggressiveness of irony. It is a source of non-directed, goalless energy, and it complements or replaces what used to be the force of the character's desire, feeling, action, and thought with the attitude of the narrator. The diagrammatic method leaves gaps and disrupts

continuity and causality in order to create space for the exploration of the hidden possibilities of force, of ambivalent evaluation inherent in the exhausted system of values and the stereotyped literary tradition, and thus space for a replenishment of narrative energy, of viewpoints and methods, by the creation of a contrasting multi-perspective. We will further discuss this overlap of perspectives, of the satiric, the grotesque and the comic modes, and their cooperation with play, irony, and parody, in an extra section at the end of the book.

### 7.13.2. Minimalism: Richard Brautigan, Renata Adler, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Abish, Gilbert Sorrentino

The rise of the behavior-model and the corresponding diagrammatic method that Barthelme develops to the extreme are not restricted to his own narrative strategy, but are important ingredients of postmodern fiction in general. By the juxtaposition of incongruous items, the reduction of causal and logic links to mere sequential ones, and the creation of an order of simultaneity, an aesthetic distance is attained that gains space for the reintroduction of energy by destroying traditional and rational forms (and introducing ironic, comic, parodic views). The behavior model and the corresponding diagrammatic method are extremely important to postmodern writers like Brautigan, Renata Adler, Vonnegut, and others, because it allows them the full range of experimentation. Brautigan's novel *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, which is an anti-status-quo novel set in Big Sur, California, about zany Lee Mellon and Jessee, the narrator, contains many passages like the following, which disrupt traditional laws of transition, coherence, meaningfulness:

The alligators bobbed to the top of the pond. It stopped raining. Elizabeth was wearing a white dress. Lee Mellon scratched his head. Night came. I said something to Elaine. The pond was quiet like the *Mona Lisa* (CG 115).

Lee Mellon went and put the dope in the kitchen. Ray Earle shrugged his shoulders. The rest of the day passed quietly. Elizabeth looked beautiful. Elaine was nervous. Ray Earle got deeply involved in catching the alligators (CG 135).

Renata Adler's novel *Speedboat* is a non-totalizing, non-artful collection of fragments and disparate materials, which is

largely concerned with language. Character is defined by passivity, “a willingness to float aimlessly in an ocean of urban flotsam and technological junk” (Wilde 1981, 155). The characterization of her social circle exhibits a manner of presentation similar in its diagrammatic traits though not in some other features to Barthelme’s (Adler’s Jan Fain has a story and a biography of her own):

We are thirty-five. Some of us are gray. We all do situps or something to keep fit. I myself wear bifocals. Since I am not yet used to wearing specs at all, I tend to underestimate the distance required, for instance, for kisses on the cheek [...]. We have had some drunks, an occasional psychotic break, eleven divorces, one autistic child, six abortions, two unanticipated homosexuals, several affairs of the sort that are lifelong and quiet and sad, one drowning, two cases of serious illness, one hatred each, no crimes. No crimes is no small thing (*SB* 148).

To quote its subtitle, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* is written in a “somewhat [...] telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales” that both disconnects the individual situations and (re)connects them in terms of the simultaneity of discrepant items. The factual method, whenever it becomes diagrammatical in this book, sketches long stretches of time in the life of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, who as prisoner of war has survived the fire-bombing of Dresden in World War II, and — in an injection of science fiction strategies into the novel — is abducted to an extra-terrestrial planet, Tralfamadore, where he learns a new way of looking at things, namely that “[a]ll moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist”, and that one can look “at all the different moments” in a spatial way, “just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance” (*SF* 23). In a passage like the following, “all different moments” are arranged in a “spatial” way; simultaneity as viewpoint overforms time sequence:

Billy became rich. He had two children, Barbara and Robert. In time, his daughter married another optometrist, and Billy set him up in business. Billy’s son Robert had a lot of trouble in high school, but Character 520 From Modernism to Postmodernism then he joined the famous Green Berets. He straightened out, became a fine young man and he fought in Vietnam. Early in 1968, a group of optometrists, with Billy among them, chartered an airplane to fly them from Ilium to an international convention of optometrists in Montreal. The plane crashed on top of Sugarbush Mountain, in Vermont. Everybody was killed but Billy. So it goes. While

Billy was recuperating in a hospital in Vermont, his wife died accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning. So it goes (*SF* 21- 22).

The empty spaces in-between the registered “facts” or items can expand to a point where the text not only leaves gaps but willfully obstructs the notions of consistency, coherence, verisimilitude, logic, and whatever may “normally” pass for meaning, rendering the imagined world fantastic. In Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew*, many passages are written in such a radically incoherent, diagrammatic style. The book itself is a collection of notebooks, scrapbooks, lists, excerpts from books, stories, stories within stories, and so on, which stand only in a “diagrammatic” connection with one another.

*Why are these pipples taking their hets off?*

They are entering a church. It’s very warm for June. Joe Nameth is speaking in Ozone Park. The Phillies have won the pennant. God is just. Itchy foreheads. The flag is passing by. Pope Paul has arrived at second base. The daughter of Rosie O’Grady has appeared on Ovington avenue. A rough beast has slouched toward Bethlehem to be born. The sudden summer shower has ended as quickly as it began. To fill them with yellow pencils. It’s raining violets. They don’t know no better. Ask a silly question. The winner has paid \$ 93.40. Love’s magic spell is everywhere (*MS* 144).

The absence/presence model of emotion and personality that characterizes behavior-fiction is transferred also to later postmodern fictions, though the latter mostly attenuate the incongruities of surface and language and aim at a more coherent but still minimalistic style. The narrator in Walter Abish’s novel *How German Is It* says of Ulrich’s, the protagonist’s book that he is writing, in a remark that applies also to Abish’s novel: “The characters in [Ulrich’s] book can be said to be free of emotional disturbances, free of emotional impairments. They meet here and there [...] and without too much time spent analyzing their own needs, allow their brains a brief respite, as they embrace each other in bed” (*HG* 16). Though there are of course parallels to Barthelme’s emotional minimalism, what is evident, however, quite in accordance with a shift in late postmodern fiction, is a stronger and different social note. The book announces that this is not a time for deep emotions and desires, and by setting “up questions like traps” (*HG* 5) it points at the “void” that the consumption of goods and services can neither abolish nor fill.

Finally, one should remember that the behavior-attitude is also an available model for the presentation of the diminishing authenticity of character in non-minimalistic fiction, where the character is again reduced, this time to a player of roles, as especially in John Barth's novels. As mentioned before, in *The End of the Road*, Jakob Horner, suffering from "cosmopsis", a paralysis of the will, learns from the black doctor that the human being is an assortment of roles, of adopted behaviors, of "masks". But "[d]on't think there's anything behind them: *ego* means *I*, and *I* means *ego*, and the ego by definition is a mask" (*ER* 84-85).

#### 7.14. Action in Fiction

A deed or action according to Hegel is

something *simply* determined, universal, to be grasped as an abstraction; it is, theft, or a good action, a brave deed, and so on, and what it *is* can be *said* of it. It *is* this, and its being is not merely a sign, but the fact itself. It *is* this, and the individual human being *is* what the *deed is*. In the simplicity of *this being*, the individual is for others a universal being who really is, and who ceases to be something only 'meant.' It is true that, in the deed, he is not explicitly present as Spirit; but when it is a question of his being *qua being*, and, on the one hand, the twofold being of bodily shape and deed are contrasted, each purporting to be what he actually is, then it is the deed alone that must be affirmed as his *genuine being* — not his face or outward appearance, which is supposed to express what he 'means' by his deeds, or what anyone might suppose he merely *could* do. Similarly, on the other hand, when his *performance* and his inner *possibility*, capacity or intention are contrasted, it is the former alone which is to be regarded as his true actuality, even if he deceives himself on the point, and, turning away from his action into himself, fancies that in this inner self he is something else than what he is in the deed. Individuality, when it commits itself to the objective element in putting itself into a deed, does of course risk being altered and perverted. But what settles the character of the deed is just this: whether the deed is an *actual* being that endures, or whether it is merely a fancied performance, that in itself is nothing at all, and passes away (1977, 194).<sup>133</sup>

Hegel's "factual" perspective on action can be complemented with Aristotle's "inner" view. According to Aristotle "[c]haracter gives us qualities, but it is in our actions — what we do — that we are happy or the reverse" (qtd. in P. Brooks 11).<sup>134</sup> Everything Hegel notes about action is controversial in post-



modernism. So is Aristotle's notion of action, though the postmodern writer might agree with Aristotle that action would create [un]happiness if it were feasible. There are at least three epistemological reasons that speak against action in postmodern fiction. (1) The postmodern author is bound to question the view that action is the character, because it minimalizes the role of consciousness and reflection in their functions as constitutive factors of character. (2) He or she also does not consider action an unproblematic notion. The fact that action is considered self-willed, self-controlled, and attributable to a moral decision presupposes a self-responsible character and its verity, which postmodern fiction denies. The single action is meaningless before the horizon of doubt, the clichédness of all values, and the fact that the world is "impossibly complex" (Coover). (3) Furthermore, action would create dissimilarity, inequality, and dominance-relationships, while the postmodern author might tend towards leveling characters and experiences, and therefore not choose the self-determined system of action, but focus on decentered areas of operation and make the character a passive observer of what happens.

Yet if one defines action not as mere fact but as a plural and ambivalent phenomenon, there are at least five points that speak for a role of action in the presented network of human relations in the postmodern fictional world. (1) Though in defining action Hegel is not interested in complexity, action is in fact ambiguous because, for instance, it may only *appear* to be a self-willed and self-controlled force, but at the same time be *in fact* willed and predetermined by society and anonymous powers and thus controlled from outside and by outside forms of conduct — an ambivalence that can be made useful in the struggle between necessity and freedom, the supremacy of the System and the resistance of the character, who can become paranoiac under the pressure of anonymous Powers, the terroristic control system of society, as in Pynchon's novels. (2) Entropy, the running-down of energy in a closed system, requires "action", "doing" as a counterforce, in order for narrative to be able to mark the depletion of energy, just as the power of the system requires resistance, resistance of individuals or groups, in order to be recognized for what it is, as Foucault has rightly noted. (3) Action is doing. Though action can be a counterforce against entropy, "just doing" can lead to and support entropy if its regulating forms are

emptied of meaning, are no longer controlled by veritable values, or if the activities become chaotic. It is by “just doing” that the system rules the world, while the character, resisting power from outside, would ask the value question, “what is worth doing?” (Gaddis) (4) The satiric, grotesque, and comic modes need as their target people who act, act viciously, inhumanly, and laughably. The satiric and the grotesque views ask the moral question, while, as we will see, the free comic spirit of the postmodern novel goes beyond it. (5) Action has also a function, a “minus function” (Lotman) as empty space. If action is stymied and reduced to mere behavior, the absence of action (and decision-making) may appear as an (“unnatural”) deficiency that produces irritation or unhappiness, but it also may call up the comic and ironic views. The action-phenomenon is thus attached to a complex framework that requires some more elaboration. There are at least four problem areas that can be isolated.

(1) Action stands in close relation to *reflection*. An action is not just something in itself; it is bound into a dynamic process, has a *story*, a phase before the fact, i.e., a preparation, and a phase after, an evaluation, all of which can complicate the action. In actual fact, this action story, just like the (narrated) situation, has the nature of a model. The formal model of the action story has at least four basic elements: *consciousness*, *temporal structuredness*, the *factual action* and the *result* of the process. They are general components, constitutive categories, abstract conditions of the model, which are defined in relation to one another and which can be connected (in changing relations of dominance) in terms of causality, correspondence, interaction, and conditioning. The fully developed pattern of the action story is what Henry James is master of. Yet on the level of manifestation, each of these basic components of the action story can be reduced, dissolved, deleted, or replaced because they are always present as constituents of the action story, even if they are not realized. The phases before and after the action can be shortened or lengthened; reflection and action can work together or not. The modes of thinking about and executing the action are in a way incommensurable because consciousness is directed towards the potential and action towards the actual; this provides tension between action and reflection, between action and the phases before and after the action, and between the evaluation of the action before and after the fact. The role of feeling and desire in the various phases of the

action story additionally complicates the picture to the extent that it can become a psychological puzzle. In the following sections we will focus on the relationship between reflection and action, which not only contrast in the individual case but fundamentally conflictual and even antagonistic because, as Sartre holds, reflection is a generator of insecurity, anxiety, endless possibilities, and thus the dead end of action, which, contrary to reflection, selects only one possibility among many (a conflict that especially Barth and Pynchon make use of).

We can further specify the circumstances that cause the problematic relationship between action and reflection in individual cases. Violent action is generally spontaneous, uncontrolled and shuns reflection; it erupts out of the unconscious without recognizable preparation, motive, or emotional reaction (cf. Hawkes, *The Lime Twig*), though there are of course reasons for it. Conversely, in the case of indecision or confusion, reflection may expand, become an obstacle and a barrier in the preparatory phase when the character does not know what to do or how to do something; and it may turn into a burden afterwards when the actor sees a discrepancy between expectation and result or does not know how to evaluate, or even to what source to attribute the action. Furthermore, not only the lack or expansion of reflection in the action story but also the whole scenario, the chosen framework, influence the orientation of action and the kind of reduction it may suffer. Either the *self* with its problems of dividedness and self-alienation, or the *situation* with a self that is not, or no longer, in control can be accentuated, though none of the two can be eliminated from consideration. The action story in both cases includes action and reflection, as well as feeling and emotional disposition. This disposition presupposes and directs the choice of one of the human constants as frame of reference, either confidence in rationality, or anxiety and insecurity. This has consequences for the process of the action story, as has the suppression of, or compensation for, tension, disquiet, and angst by irony, play, and the comic mode. The multiplicity of viewpoints and the failure to establish clear-cut causal relations, to attribute causes, motives, and values to what happens, lead to the fantastification of action.

(2) Being part of a larger entity, of an action story, i.e., never being self-contained and “alone”, action always needs *interpretation*

before and after the fact. Action may even be said to be a construct of interpretation since it has to fit into psychological and social contexts. Not only can the preparatory phase of the action story be a problem for the realization of the action by raising doubts and uncertainties, so can the phase afterwards, the evaluation of the action, which in hindsight may diminish the action's value. (This is one of the reasons why Stencil does not aim at an end of his quest for Lady V., for its ending would open the evaluation phase). The motives, the direction, and the results of an action can hardly ever be completely foreseen or afterwards explained because, in Gass's words from *The Tunnel*, "[t]he consequences of our actions escape our intentions" (323). Since plan and result of the action are not the same, can actually be divergent, they may be contrasted after the act. How the relation between intention and outcome is appraised in hindsight by the acting subject or the narrator, as desire and fulfillment or desire and failure, depends on the assessment of the genesis of the particular action, of the play of cause and effect, and on the attribution of power and resistance to specific determinants. Intention, action, and result and their coordination may be attributed to different sources and aims, may be made the responsibility of the self, of others, of necessity or chance. This openness in assigning causes and origins to action complicates the relationship between character and action, especially in postmodern fiction, the more so since not only origins and aims, causes and effects may split or multiply, but the subject itself, the seeming master of the action story, may also split or multiply. The self of an acting character can be altered and perverted by the action carried out, as it were, against its will or under circumstances that run counter to expectations. Differences emerge from the preference given to the acting self or the conscious, reflecting self. As Hegel argues, action creates an identity of the self for others; yet this outer self might *not* be considered the true self by the acting character, who thinks itself truly defined only by its inner life, by consciousness. And its inner life may have various selves. The attribution of action and reflection to one single self thus might be false, for the self multiplies. In "Lost in the Funhouse", for instance, Ambrose reflects on the question of what the I is: "You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you. Ambrose gets hard, when Ambrose doesn't want to, and

*obversely*. Ambrose watches them disagree; Ambrose watches him watch" (LF 81).

Frames of reference for action outside the self, for the attribution of origin and goal, cause and effect, are *necessity* and *chance*. Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* learns from the Tralfamadorians that there is no free will, only necessity, or rather (since such a statement is already an evaluation of the form of existence) that a question like "Why me? [...] is a very Earthling question to ask [...] Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because the moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? [...] Well, here we are [...] trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*" (SF 66). But for an Earthling there are the why-questions that cannot be avoided; they lead to uncertainty, a wavering between the void, chance, necessity, and freedom as frames of making sense. Ebenezer Cooke in Barth's *The Sot-weed Factor* reflects about the void: "I wonder: What moral doth the story hold? Is't that the universe is vain? The chaste and consecrated life a hollow madness? Or is't that what the cosmos lacks we must ourselves supply?" (SWF 670) Kohler in Gass's *The Tunnel* notes: "beneath the surface of life is the pit, the abyss, the awful truth, a truth that cannot be lived with, that cannot be abided: human worthlessness" (Tun 197). In her attempt to understand the world, Oedipa in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* finally faces the void: "[T]his, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her" (CoL 128). *Contingency*, universal chance, is the other frame that is placed outside human responsibility. For the presentation of history Coover uses, in *The Public Burning*, "[d]esign as game. Randomness as design" (PB 190). Sukenick writes, "[t]ime is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only chance" (DN 41). In his novel, suggestively called *Out* (of norms, conventions, order, determinacy), he uses a dialogic exchange of positions to counter the reader's expectation of logical coherence: "You pursue essentials. I ride with the random [...] You struggle toward stillness I rest in movement" (127). Elkin notes in an already quoted statement "that the world spins on an axis made out of whim, just pure whim. The ultimate whimmer is God" (Ziegler and Bigsby 102). In the author's words, his fiction itself "is completely arbitrary and whimsical" (Ziegler and Bigsby 104). God in *The Living End* destroys the world out of whim, out of the feeling that the art of His creation has not

been appreciated enough. Jack Gibbs in Gaddis's novel *JR* writes a book "about random patterns and mechanizing" (*JR* 147), thus mirroring what is at the heart of Gaddis's fiction, "precisely this courage to live without Absolutes, which is, really, nothing more than growing up, the courage to accept a relative universe and even one verging upon chance" (Abadi-Nagy 77). Moreover, to quote Jerzy Kosinski: "With a true sense of the randomness of life's moments man is at peace with himself — and that peace is happiness" (Cahill 142). In a combination of necessity and accident, the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* will, so it is pre-ordained, accidentally blow up the world while experimenting with a new rocket fuel.

Since chance is an "empty" category that denies the "meaningful" attribution of responsibility for acting or, for that matter, suffering, the responsibility for what happens can be instead assigned to the intrigues of anonymous power-systems whose activities are anti-humanistic and forestall, by suspending or abandoning self-chosen action, the realization of the character as an authentic, unique ego. Ebenezer Cooke in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* makes the point: "Faith, 'tis a rare wise man knows who he is [...] Did I, then, make a choice? Nay, for there was no *I* to make it. 'Twas the choice made *me*" (*SWF* 71). To Mucho, the salesman of used cars in Pynchon's *Lot 49*, people are not themselves but parts of a mechanized system. The trade-ins of his customers are like "motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like [...] each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life. As if it were the most natural thing" (*CoL* 4-5). As mentioned before, anonymous "Forces" outside generate in post-modern fiction an all-encompassing, "mythicized" "They-System" (Pynchon, *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*; Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*), or a "terroristic universe" (Hawkes in Bellamy 1974, 112), or "a dark universe of wounded galaxies and novia conspiracies" (Burroughs 1962b, 99). Freedom of action and moral choice are scarcely an issue for much of postmodern fiction. They are reserved for the imagination.

Generated by coincidence or under the control of outside systems, actions become "unreal"; they are fantasized. What would

be seen from the inside as an action turns into indifferent circumstances when looked at from the outside: it takes the shape of an *event* (not in Heidegger's existential sense of the self-coming-to-itself, but as something that just happens). Action and event are then exchangeable and may turn into mere behavior. (We will come back to this point later in the discussion of the perspectives of evaluation at the end of the book.) While actions and events can both be good or bad for a person or a society, only actions, not events, can be "right" or "wrong" in a moral sense. The predominance of events and behavior complicates and reduces the interrelation of aesthetics and ethics in the text. The uncertainty, the randomness of existence, the non-answerability of the why-question, life without absolutes, even without a social system of moral values, renders the interpretation of the world wide open to a multiplicity of attitudes, to play, irony, and parody, to evaluations by the satiric and grotesque perspectives and a new kind of free comic mode, all of which can combine and mutually relativize one another in a quite new, postmodern way that was not available to modern literature, perhaps with the partial exception of Kafka, Joyce, and Faulkner. We will use war-novels of a new kind, with their strangely distancing view of violence, especially Heller's *Catch 22*, to discuss the various modes of evaluation and their interplay in postmodern fiction in more detail later.

(3) The quotidian world knows of another kind of action, for which Hegel does not provide, but that the theory of action has noted.<sup>135</sup> It is the action performed every day. There is obviously a difference between the innovative, provocative action that transgresses borderlines and redefines the old in terms of the new, and the *praxis-oriented*, preservative action that promotes and protects community and includes the new into the old. The first kind of action is more self-oriented, the second stabilizes the character's place in the every-day world and the communication between individual and society. Not only has the individualizing and existential kind of action often been suspended in postmodern fiction, but also so has the praxis-oriented one. Both have fallen victim, as it were, to the postmodern appearance-disappearance paradigm. The praxis-oriented action has lost its meaning with the questioning of communication. It seems that communal action has become irrelevant with the loss of significance that convention, tradition, societal rules, and regulations, but also the routines of everydayness, suffered. Everydayness was

supplied and understood in the novel of the nineteenth century in terms of the “natural”, the endless diversity of human conduct, the variable mixtures of “causally necessary and socially conventional behavior”, where “[c]hoices and contingencies” connect in “going to a restaurant, taking a trip, frying an egg, greeting a friend, going to a movie” (W. Martin, *Recent Theories* 67), by “situational”, or “instrumental scripts” (Schank and Abelson 64-65) and conventional practices in general, of which every culture has a stock repertoire, endlessly variable in the individual text. An important reason for the abandonment of this kind of action, of the “vraisemblage” and social authenticity of the world of the quotidian, is the growing value of sophistication and reflection; and this emphasis on consciousness and its mental activities isolates the self from others. Reflection and sophistication make people aware of the fact that even the kind of daily action to which they are used includes aporias. It cancels its satisfying and liberating effect by repetition. With growing matter-of-factness and “naturalness”, it becomes routinized and loses its potential to satisfy, to make happy in Aristotle’s terms, and to individualize; it stimulates the desire for change.

(4) And there is a further issue. R. S. Crane has extended and differentiated the idea of plot by distinguishing “plots of action”, “plots of character”, and “plots of thought” (620). In analogy to the plot of thought, one might speak of an *action of thought* that follows its own logic, has again its own story, is dramatized and builds its own authentic gestalt, as was demonstrated above. And in analogy to both action and action of thought one might claim an action of the imagination that creates the fictional world, with or without conflicts and drama but always with power-resistance, form-force relationships. In postmodern fiction, this productive process of the imagination, the creation of the story, is often styled as action and set beside or against (meta-)reflection, which again is conceived of as action, and both may be set against the “real” or actual action, a lack of which in the story may be considered a failure. In Barth’s “The Life Story”, the writer/protagonist “clung onto his narrative depressed by the disproportion of its ratiocination to its dramatization, reflection to action” (*LF* 123); and in the title story “Lost in the Funhouse” the narrator comes to the conclusion: “There’s no point in going farther; this isn’t getting anybody anywhere; they haven’t even come to the funhouse yet” (*LF* 80). In Pynchon’s *V.*, the



reflection of the protagonist is full of conflicts that pushes on the action of the quest because the activity must not end; its ending would mean entropy, death. Reflection as action may interpret and dramatize suicidal action as in Hawkes's *Travesty* and Barth's "Night-Sea Journey". Both the harmony and the antagonism between "true" action and reflection as action are most obvious when an "I" narrator, as in the two cases mentioned, experiences the crisis of his life, confronts death. One might say quite generally that the more the human freedom to choose, necessary for concrete self-responsible action, is doubted, and the latter problematized or abandoned, the more the action is transferred to the creative processes of imagination and reflection. They are both dramatized, in agreement with, or against, one another, and adopt the form of (futile) action, the action to produce the artifact. It is an activity which develops, so to speak, its own conflictual story, with (doubting, frustrating) reflexive/emotional phases before and after (the success or failure of) the creative act(s).

Five texts will demonstrate different possibilities of interconnecting action, desire, emotion, and reflection in the post-modern American novel. Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* sets passion/action/ violence against the entropy of a static life that has eliminated conflict. Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* starts with the divorce of reflection and action in what he calls cosmopsis, a blockage of the will. The ideology of keeping one's distance to the world in order not to lose one's innocence by involvement in its impurities is exchanged at the end for the fusion of action and emotion in acts of solidarity and compassion, a development that then again is ironized by another turn that demonstrates the limitation of the human will and the cruelty of events. Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* places action in the context of mystery and paranoia, of order and disorder, and splits it into self-willed questing and incidental drifting, submitting to the randomness of life. In Gaddis's fantastic business novel, *JR*, action deteriorates to the business maxim of "just doing". Mere unreflected business activities, directed exclusively towards material gain and personal power, are confronted with the question "what is worth doing?" The two mottos problematize the contrast between chaos and order, society and art, relativizing business by art and art by business. And finally, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* exemplifies the use of Voodoo aesthetics to represent

action as life force, as a challenge to (dead) Western History, and as a subversion of repressive, death-driven, white cultural forms and values.

### **7.14.1. Behavior Against Action: Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar***

Brautigan bases his novel on the antagonism between behavior and action and employs a full-scale model of life and force, including passion and violence to ironize satirically and playfully a reduced model of well-regulated, communal behavior. Drained of emotion, desire and action, the ideological worldview of order approaches the status of entropy, of the inanimate. The novel presents a pastoral idyll, allusively called iDEATH, where everything has become inanimate, indeed is made of watermelon sugar: houses, books, graves, statues, food, fuel; even “[o]ur lives we have carefully constructed from watermelon sugar” (*WS* 1). Though death is not eliminated, it is made beautiful. The dead rest in glass coffins on the bottom of the river with foxfire inside “so that they glow at night and we can appreciate what comes next” (*WS* 60). Everything that might stir thoughts of old times, like books and paintings, and the machines that might revive action, competition, and strife, are heaped up in the “Forgotten Works”. People seem to live in harmony and satisfaction. Emotions and actions are reduced to the gentle life of behavior without psychological depth, without questionings, without past and future. Love and pain that might intensify life and cause a person to act individually are neither known nor understood. But there are built-in signs of disruption and dissatisfaction. A violent drunk, inBOIL, and his gang defect from the gentle life, and desire to revive action and emotion. Maintaining that the tigers, whose violence was formerly a threat to the community, are the real iDEATH, while the “unity” and “wholeness” of the gentle life is only material and mechanical in kind, they commit violent action against themselves, cutting themselves into pieces in front of the disgusted inmates of iDEATH. Their action, however, is as meaningless in this context of undisturbable “peace” as Margaret’s suicide out of the desire for a love that is no longer reciprocated by the man she loves and is in fact quite contrary to the rule. The narrator, her former lover, who watches her hang herself on an apple tree, does not understand much

but deep down obviously feels a lack and a desire for a different life, since he does not sleep well and is in the habit of taking long walks at night for no given reason. His inner disturbance can be included into the gentle life because it is also reduced to “behavior” and does not explode into open feeling or individual action. In this book the (emotional and intellectual) whole of a person has been replaced by a partial being that becomes fantastically fixed. Beauty has been devitalized, harmony turned into entropy. Desire, emotion, and action are here seen as personal and therefore in this kind of gentle-life community as anti-social, but, paradoxically even in their fantasticality, they are the only “real” things there are.

Wherever else in postmodern fiction beauty, harmony and peace are suggested by a quiet surface of life — for instance in the extra-terrestrial alternative world of the Tralfamadורים, who cherish harmony and happiness grounded on the surrender of variability, individuality, and personal action in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* — they are, with only a few exceptions, unfavorably contrasted with the *life* and *force* principles of vitality, struggle, and movement, which have become, in one way or another, together with the life force of the imagination, the main positive frames of reference, as many of the exemplary texts that we discussed and will discuss prove. The high esteem given in postmodern fiction to the dynamics of difference, movement, struggle, to energy, fluidity, and chaos, to dissemination, deferral, and multiplicity, of course corresponds to the general trend of deconstructionism, to the aesthetics of “crisis”, “displacement”, “absence”, “violence”, or “madness”, to the principles of movement, nomadism, endless deferral of meaning, asserted by Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze-Guattari. It is one of the basic ironies of postmodern fiction that the life-principle that manifests itself in action can only be concretized within the reductive forms of the system, in acts of obsession and paranoia, in self-reflexive acts of the imagination, or, ex negativo, in devitalized forms of behavior that are fantasized into sterile irreality and appear to signify the loss of the sense for action.

### 7.14.2. Active Participation Against Passive Distance: John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*

In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, action is opposed to passivity, and the two are related to experience/participation and innocence/distance respectively, as they are also in Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, which we discussed above. Just like Pynchon's novels, Barth's narratives are heavily plotted, making, however, "the artificial element in art", "the artifice part of the point" (qtd. in Scholes 1967, 137), i.e., emphasizing the artifice of plot, of actions and events that play an important role in the composition of the book. The excessive, "flabberghasting plot" of Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* sends Ebenezer Cooke, the "wandering hero" of the book, from England to America to become poet laureate of Maryland and makes him live through many adventures, hopes, and disappointments, without, however, any significant results, since plot with Barth "doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires" (*LF* 92). It is fantasized in order to keep "the plural of a text" intact: "everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, an ultimate structure" (Barthes 1974, 11-12).

The book is again about the fall from innocence to experience. Similar to Gass's *Omensetter's Luck*, the fall is necessary, is part of human destiny, but contrary to Gass's book, this fall, which entails involvement in human affairs, is deemed positive and enriching — to a certain extent. The choice the protagonist faces is to persist in "innocence", aloofness, distance and passivity, or to engage in the world with compassion, love, and action. He lives in a constant contradiction between his own ideas, which turn out to be quixotic fictions, and the actual situations he finds himself in. At the beginning of the novel he is undecided, equally attracted by many possibilities, happy to drift along with the "tide of change". He constitutes "consistently no special sort of person" (21) and suffers like Jake Horner in *The End of the Road* from "cosmopsis", i.e., a paralysis of the will. In spite of all parody of patterns, also of the traditional character model, Barth makes use of the concept of the full-grown person by having the protagonist Ebenezer Cooke undergo a development and maturation in which he learns com-

passion, participates in the feeling of pain, and exercises solidarity with his fellows. At the end Ebenezer realizes and admits the pain his innocence has caused (“That is the crime I stand indicted for” [788]), and, in order to share pain and happiness, he marries the syphilitic and pox-ridden whore Joan Toast, who fills a multiplicity of roles by being his first and only love and at the same time “no woman but womankind”. Captured by the Indians, he also shows compassion in a broader sense. He takes on an active role by supporting others, when, instead of saving himself, he risks his own life to save his companions. By crossing the borderline towards self-willed and self-controlled action, an active commitment to social responsibility, Ebenezer surrenders his “innocence”, i.e., his lack of engagement in the world and also his (aesthetic) “aloofness” from the limitations of the world, maintaining as inner values, however, innocence and aloofness. Thus he remains split. Indecisive reflection accompanies his actions. The phase after the fact is defined by doubt. He articulates this ambivalence in both a comicalizing and serious fashion: “a voice in me cries, ‘Down with’t [innocence], then!’ while another stands in awe before the enterprise; sees in the vain construction [innocence] all nobleness allowed to fallen men” (670).

This is an ambivalent view of what Barth calls his “notion of the theme” of the novel, i.e., the dramatization in comic terms of “a kind of tragic view of innocence”. In fact, “Cooke’s progress through the novel — the loss of his estate and his regaining it by contracting a social disease — is meant to dramatize, in a comic way, the ambivalence of innocence. [...] One could dramatize the tragic view of experience as well! The affirmation of either as a value is at best a paradoxical and tenuous enterprise” (Ziegler and Bigsby 18). The tragic view of experience is based on the fact that the character stands between equal values, and, in spite of their equal worth, can choose only one, thereby violating the other, in this case either the purity of the non-acting self or the mingling with, and acting in, the world. The comic view of innocence points to the fact that there is, however, no choice, that personal non-activity and (unsocial) innocence cannot be preserved, since the human being exists in a world of experience. The final ironic turn of course is that the necessary involvement in the world does not establish meaning anyway, because all self-responsible action is nullified by the super power of (outside) events — or so it seems.

The uncertainty created by the rivalry between innocence/reticence and experience/involvement in life is confirmed by the end of the book. Considering the end, one might say that Barth in fact makes the “action story”, the interchange of phases of action and reflection, the model that the book itself follows in its composition. After the narrative imagination has acted out its specific, pre-ordained plot, including the end, the text, in a phase of after- and self-reflection, offers a new and different combination, as it were, and corrects the result. The seemingly happy ending of the novel (the marriage between Ebenezer and Joan Toast and his maturing into a person, not only a poet) is suspended in another winding of the plot upon itself, inscribed in an “apology”, which opens the novel again. The end, instead of reaping the fruits of self-willed action and the satisfaction of reflection, is marked by violent *events*. Almost all the personnel of the book either vanish or die brutal, sudden deaths. Thus we find ourselves placed in yet another frame, a concluding parody, or rather, an inversion of the closed, happy ending of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel marked by action, as well as of the novel of education, and of what Fiedler calls “the Sentimental Love Religion” in which “the Pure Young Girl replaces Christ as the savior”, and “marriage becomes the equivalent of bliss eternal” (Fiedler 1960, 10-11). Yet — and that is the most important result — through all convolutions and all discourses, in an overall paradoxical turn, the plot demonstrates that “simple” human values like charity, sacrifice, love, and heroism, i.e., the “active” values of communication and care, remain in themselves untouchable by irony, though their discourses may be ironized. These qualities are in fact the values that define humanity, whatever their historical “framing” or their purpose, their success or their failure or their narrative perspective.

### **7.14.3 Action, Drifting, Reflection: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49***

*The Crying of Lot 49* is an exemplary case of how the action-rich detective novel can be transformed by postmodern fiction. The traditional pattern of the detective novel leads detective and plot from uncertainty to certainty; this design is here reversed by starting with certainty and ending with uncertainty. But Pynchon goes a step

further. Not only does he reverse the roles of certainty and uncertainty, but he also weakens the ability of the characters to act. Uncertainty undermines the force of initiative, of self-willed action, muting them into incidental, forceless drifting, and reflection. Uncertainty originates from ambivalence and multi-valence of all that happens. Order is counterbalanced with disorder, the “normal” with the “other”, the attempt to act with entropy.<sup>136</sup> The book is an exemplary postmodern case of the intricate interplay of the frustration and rebellion experienced by the quester, frustration at the entropic social processes, and rebellion against the “system”, as well as the combination, even fusion, of action, symbolic perception, reflection and reaction to outer events. Outer clues and events both stimulate and obstruct Oedipa’s quest for the underground Tristero communication system, which would be a lively alternative to the stifling conventional world of the bourgeois middle class that she leaves behind. The diffusion and evaporation of the Tristero, the quest’s target, impedes action and calls up reflection. There is scarcely a better case than this book for illustrating how action, the *method* of accomplishing something, becomes an object of reflection, not a deed but an *issue* for the self-definition of character and its failure, and a medium for the *theme* of communication.

After having been made an executor of the will of her dead, former lover Pierce Inverarity, together with the actor-turned-lawyer Metzger, the heroine, Oedipa Maas, while collecting information about the Inverarity estate, meets any number of signs, clues, revelations that point to the secret activities of an underground communication system, called Tristero. Driven by her active temperament, her extreme emotional state of mind, her symbolic mode of perception, and her propensity for thinking in terms of analogy, Oedipa is not only a gatherer of information, but also a “borderer”, somebody moving to the “edge”, standing “on a borderline invisible, but yet at its crossing, between worlds” (*Vine* 228). Her quest alienates her from her accustomed sphere of bourgeois normalcy and opens another world, yet it does not point to a safe or even recognizable alternative. It demands action and is therefore labeled in terms of action, but a kind of “muted” action (“muted” is a keyword of the book). There is in fact a disparity between her energetic quest for enlightenment, i.e., her attempt to meet with all the people that might be of help in her attempt at clarification, and

then her letting the quest go, her *drifting* through space and time, “anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point, lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself” (125). What might grow larger than she is the confrontation with the “Other”, her obsession with the idea that “here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail”, in a “calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (92).

The novel follows an intricate pattern of acting and drifting. Actions and events meet in such strange forms that the text often marks them with the words “odd” or “curious”. At the beginning of her adventures, it is indeed an outside event, a letter from a law firm in Los Angeles, naming her an executor of Inverarity’s will, that draws her out of a life of routine. The odd mixture of self-willed action that stands for freedom, and outside incidents that break into her life, unbidden and unforeseen, fantasizes the situation and adds an ironic, even comic perspective to what she does. This holds true already of the beginning. At the motel “Echo Courts” (14), Oedipa meets Metzger, her co-executor of Inverarity’s will, who becomes her new lover. She prepares for the Strip Botticelli game that they agree on as part of an “elaborate, seduction, plot” (18) by putting on all the clothes she can find, but is interrupted in her doings in the bathroom by “a can of hair spray” that hits the floor and is propelled “with a great outsurge of pressure”, “hissing malignantly”, “bounc[ing] off the toilet and whizz[ing] by Metzger’s right ear, missing by maybe a quarter of an inch” (22-23). When she is ready with her dress ensemble (which mirrors in the layers of her alternating clothes her alternative selves), making love turns into a confusion of activity and passivity, of action and event. She “fell on [Metzger], began kissing him to wake him up”, falls then herself asleep only to wake up “at last to find herself getting laid” (26). The climax of their sexual encounter again marks a curious interface of actions and events: “Her climax and Metzger’s, when it came, coincided with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black. It was a curious experience. The Paranoids [members of a band] had blown a fuse” (27). And the following chapter starts: “Things then did not delay in turning curious” (28).



Oedipa's quest calls for action, and action manifests itself in three ways. (1) It takes her to an encounter with the elementary domains of energy and nature. She moves along the freeway, with an "illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape" (14) and makes a trip, together with Metzger and "the Paranoids", a group of rock musicians that play the role of hipsters and cross Oedipa's path several times, to the Pacific. She believes "in some principle of the sea as redemption for South California [...] the true Pacific stayed inviolate and integrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth" (37). This is the least important sphere of action. (2) She looks up all kinds of people who might know about the object of her quest, the Tristero communication system, and asks directly, in fact presses her dialogue partners, for information. But she fails to make progress because the men she had hoped to get help from either die or turn mad. (3) Finally, the active quest is complemented by drifting, which ironically provides her with more clues than her energetic, self-willed action, though she still does not get the knowledge that would clarify what she is searching for. Drifting is in fact a mixture of event and action, order and disorder, "reality" and hallucination, entropy and negentropy. They intensely intermix in Oedipa's quest, until the nature of all activity becomes blurred, strewn with riddles, distortions, and misinformation, and the role she plays turns deceptive and confused, in danger to end in entropy or madness.<sup>137</sup>

Some more details are needed to demonstrate the systematic way Pynchon handles action, drifting, and event and their interrelation in the description of Oedipa's quest for the Tristero Underground System, a search that is characterized by the repeated encounter of the sign of the muted posthorn and the WASTE symbol. Feeling "as if there were revelation in progress all around her", "she and Metzger drifted into a strange bar known as The Scope" (29), "a haunt for electronics assembly people from Yoyodyne" (30), a giant industrial concern that Inverarity partly owns, a place where she meets Mike Fallopian of the Peter Pinguid Society, who "was doing a history of private mail delivery in the US", regarding its "vigorous suppression" by the "federal government" as "a parable of power, its feeding, growth and systematic abuse" (35); he becomes one of her informants and discussion-partners. In 'The Scope' she hears the "Mail call" of what looks like an "inter-office mail run" (34) but

turns out to be a secret letter-exchange service for the Peter Pinguid Society, “named for the commanding officer of the Confederate man-of-war ‘Disgruntled’” (31). The society is “against industrial capitalism” (33) and uses “Yoyodyne’s inter-office delivery” (35) to keep in touch. At the latrine wall of the bar, she reads, “among lipstick obscenities”, “the following [odd] message”: “Interested in sophisticated fun? You, hubby, girl friends. The more the merrier. Get in touch with Kirby, through WASTE only, Box 7391, L.A”. ; beneath the notice “was a symbol she’d never seen before, a loop, triangle and trapezoid” (34) that looks like a muted posthorn.

During a guided tour at the Yoyodyne stockholder meeting that she attends, she gets lost and “came on one Stanley Koteks” (60), who lectures her on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the Nefastis Machine (based on “Maxwell’s Demon’s” activity, i.e., a kind of sorting, perpetual-motion machine), which provides thermodynamic energy by mental activity and is constructed to outwit the Second Law of Thermodynamics and to avoid entropy. The people who can work with it, are “[o]nly people with the gift. ‘Sensitives,’ John [Nefastis] calls them” (63). Oedipa feels that “all with Yoyodyne was normal. Except right here, where Oedipa Maas, with a thousand other people to choose from, had had to walk uncoerced into the presence of madness” (62-63). Yet strangely enough, she learns from Stanley Koteks how to pronounce the word WASTE: “It’s W.A.S.T.E. [for “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire”], lady, [...] an acronym, not ‘waste,’ and we had best not go into it any further” (63). Mike Fallopian in the bar “The Scope” tells her, “[s]ure this Koteks is part of some underground [...] an underground of the unbalanced, possibly, but then how can you blame them for being maybe a little bitter?” (63) A by-now “sensitized” (66) Oedipa visits the “Vesperhaven House, a home for senior citizens that Inverarity had put up” (65) and speaks with the 91 year-old Mr. Thoath about the Pony express and a curious incident of 1853 she found noted on a historical marker, a battle between “*a dozen Wells Fargo men*” and “*a band of masked marauders in mysterious black uniforms*” (64). She notices that the old man wears a ring from his grandfather with the “WASTE symbol” (67). She furthermore meets with Genghis Cohen, a stamp dealer who has been asked to appraise Inverarity’s stamp collection and has found strange “irregularities”, actually “deliberate mistake[s]” (71), in the details of

the stamp images: for instance on “a U.S. commemorative stamp, the Pony Express issue of 1940, 3 ¢ henna brown. Cancelled”, whose watermark had “her WASTE symbol, showing up black, a little right of center” (69-70). And Oedipa sees that “[d]ecorating each corner of” an old German stamp is “the legend *Thurn and Taxis*”, “a horn with a single loop in it. Almost like the WASTE symbol. ‘A post horn,’ Cohen said; ‘the Thurn and Taxis symbol. It was in their coat of arms’” (70). And the post horn is “a mute”. Her conclusion is: “The black costumes, the silence, the secrecy. Whoever they were their aim was to mute the Thurn and Taxis post horn” (70).

Oedipa first hears the name “Trystero” at a performance of *The Courier’s Tragedy* by Richard Wharfinger, a play from the seventeenth century, in which violent actions and events cross each other to form a fantastic, melodramatic plot with good guys and bad guys. In the play Trystero makes known that which cannot be said or known under the tyrannical Duke Angelo; the play calls forth a look from people “so obviously in on something” (55). The Trystero assassins kill the rightful heir of the adjacent Dukedom of Fagio, Niccolò, and reveal that the mysterious destiny of the Lost Guard who “all vanished without a trace” (47) was death by the order of the evil Duke Angelo. It remains unclear who put the mysterious Trystero lines (uttered by Gennaro, played by the director of the performance, Randy Driblette) into the play, and thus corrupted the established text: “No hallowed skein of stars can ward, I trow / Who’s once been set his tryst with Trystero” (52). In order to clarify her enigmatic clues, Oedipa looks up Driblette and afterwards wonders about “how accidental it [the conversation] had been” (57). She sees Professor Emory Bortz, an expert on the play and its editor, and goes back to Zapf’s Used Book Store, where she bought her copy of the play for more information, only to find it burnt down. She compares various editions, one of which, hers, mentions “Trystero”, while others do not; she thinks about the Trystero thing “until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero” (58). The history of The Tristero that she finally patches together from various sources comes to the following: “[I]t had opposed the Thurn and Taxis postal system in Europe [since the sixteenth century]; its symbol was a muted post horn; sometime before 1853 it had appeared in America and fought the Pony Express and Wells, Fargo, either as outlaws in

black, or disguised as Indians; and it survived today, in California, serving as a channel of communication for those of unorthodox sexual persuasion, inventors who believed in the reality of Maxwell's Demon, possibly her own husband, Mucho Maas" (80). "Their entire emphasis now [was] toward silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance" (130). Oedipa is ready for "all manner of revelations", "some promise of hierophany" (18),<sup>138</sup> for the significance of repetition, because "it seemed that a pattern was beginning to emerge, having to do with the mail and how it was delivered" (64). During her odyssey through San Francisco in chapter five, which brings her closer to a sense of the Tristero system's reality, she both goes forward and hesitates, a state of mind finding its expression in drifting:

Either Trystero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate. Here in San Francisco, away from all tangible assets of that estate [San Narciso], there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She had only to *drift* tonight at *random*, and watch nothing happen, to be convinced it was purely nervous, a little something for her shrink to fix. She got off the freeway at North Beach, drove around, parked finally in a steep side-street among warehouses. Then walked along Broadway, with the first crowds of evening. But it took her no more than an hour to catch sight of a muted posthorn (80, my emphasis).

In the process of her drifting in the crowd, she "found herself being herded, along with other badged citizens, toward a bar called The Greek Way", which she entered, "recalling how she had decided to drift tonight" (81), only to hear from a member the history of the IA, the "Inamorati Anonymous" (83), a society of isolates committed to non-love or rather to defending themselves against the pain of love, using for identification "a pin in the shape of the Trystero posthorn. Mute and everything" (81). This group, the IA, was founded by a "Yoyodyne executive" when he "found himself [...] automated out of a job" (83) and left by his wife. After this encounter, in a paradoxical combination of questing and drifting, Oedipa "entered the city again, the infected city" (86), where she "spent the rest of the night finding the image of the Trystero post horn" (86). Though "[w]ith her own eyes she had verified a WASTE system: seen two WASTE postmen, a WASTE mailbox, WASTE

stamps, WASTE cancellations. And the image of the muted post horn all but saturating the Bay Area [...] she wanted it all to be fantasy — some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles” (98). Yet Oedipa goes on, “played the voyeur and listener” in bars, on buses, in the streets. She has strange encounters with odd people: Jesus Arrabal, who remembers her from Mexico, “an exhausted busful of Negroes” (89) on the bus, an “uncoordinated boy”, “[c]atching a TWA flight to Miami” (90), “a child roaming the night”, “a Negro woman [...] who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth” (91), “an aging night-watchman, nibbling at a bar of Ivory Soap, who had trained his virtuoso stomach to accept also lotions, air-fresheners, fabrics, tobaccos and waxes in a hopeless attempt to assimilate it all, all the promise, productivity, betrayal, ulcers, before it was too late”; she meets “even another voyeur, who hung outside one of the city’s still-lighted windows” (91), and an “old man huddled, shaking with grief she couldn’t hear” (92), whom she takes “in her arms, actually held him” (93), and helps him up the stairs. And, “[d]ecorating each alienation, each species of withdrawal, as cufflink, decal, aimless doodling, there was somehow always the posthorn” (91). After many hours of drifting

[s]he busrode and walked on into the lightening morning, giving herself up to a fatalism rare for her. Where was the Oedipa who’d driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery (91).

To her adventures among the odd characters in the “otherness” of the city she adds another strange experience, when she comes back to the hotel and finds

the lobby full of deaf-mute delegates in party hats, copied in crepe paper after the fur Chinese communist jobs made popular during the Korean conflict. [...] They swept her on into the ballroom, where she was seized about the waist by a handsome young man in a Harris tweed coat and waltzed round and round, through the rustling, shuffling hush, under a great unlit chandelier. Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow’s head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, sloop (97).

The failure of action and drifting shifts the balance to reflection and the attempt to evaluate her experience. "Having begun to feel reluctant about following up anything" (124) because autonomous actions could no longer be distinguished from outer-directed events, because actions had in fact become alienated events while events could not be turned into or connected with self-responsible actions, Oedipa considers the possibility that she is paranoid. Reflection, like action, takes on the form of the labyrinth without exit, a favorite spatial configuration for Pynchon and postmodern literature in general. She finally faces the void:

Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They. Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; [...] onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images all over San Francisco, bribing of librarians, hiring of professional actors and Pierce Inverarity only knows what-all besides, all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. Those, now that she was looking at them, she saw to be the alternatives. Those symmetrical four. She didn't like any of them, but hoped she was mentally ill; that that's all it was. That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead (128).

The reflection on her state of mind is "closed" and "open" at the same time, "open" in the fictionality and uncertainty of the alternatives, "closed" in the iron, dualistic "Either-or" structure of the argument. This is a typical mixture of modern and postmodern argumentative styles that cancel each other out and lead to informational entropy, just as action and drifting cancel each other out and lead to entropy of action. Reflection, deprived of a satisfying result and bound up in mere possibilities, ends in extreme emotion that includes the danger of madness, which again is a state of entropy. And the

attempt to avoid madness again then turns to (passive) action, in this case her attending the stamp auction, waiting for the crying of lot 49, the Tristero stamps, and hoping to get a final clue by identifying the bidder, whose presence is expected. She is circling in a space of uncertainty that does not hold much promise for an escape from entropy. The book is not only a prime example of the postmodern handling of the action story but also of the confrontation of entropy with investigative action/reflection and their failure at negentropy, the negation of entropy. In other words, what we have here is the refutation by *situationalism* of the detective novel's identity-question-formula of progress towards knowledge. The character, who in the modernist novel is the center of interest, is here ultimately only the means for a more general purpose, namely defamiliarization and confusion, enacted by the fantastification of mind and world. Oedipa stands between too much patterning and too little patterning, which are both marks of entropy and are here mediated by her drifting.

#### 7.14.4. "Just Doing" Against "What Is Worth Doing?" Business Against Art: William Gaddis, *JR*

Gaddis's *JR* is a satire on the American value of "Just doing" and the unshakable belief in business and its path towards success and happiness. But it is at the same time a transnational novel that discusses fundamental aspects of human life and their interrelation. Like Coover's *The Public Burning*, *JR* is a voluminous, fantasized novel, a maximalist, or "putter-inner" book in contrast to a "leaver-outer" one, to use once again Thomas Wolfe's terms. But this long novel is paradoxically also a *situationalist* novel without center, without a manifest sequence of beginning, middle and end. The dialectic of order and chaos forms a continuous pattern without synthesis. This pattern is established through oppositions of activities and values like business-morality, business-art, and money-spirituality. The definition of values proceeds via the ideology of "doing". On the one hand, there is the indiscriminate call for energetic and active participation in the transactions within the system of business ("just doing"), and, on the other, this notion of "just doing" is challenged by asking the question, "what is worth doing?" (my emphasis), which subverts the maxim of doing. To illustrate this contrast, the text fragments the action story. "Doing"

here neither has nor needs a reflexive preparatory phase, and the reflexive evaluative phase after the fact is weak and full of confusion, contradiction, inefficiency. An irony of form lies in the fact that despite this “ethics” of *doing*, the novel is filled with *talking*, is almost exclusively constructed as the montage of (fragmented) dialogues.

Business is here an unordered cluster of ego forces, greed, exploitation, oppression, drive for power, without any checks and balances beyond the reified codifications and forms of doing business. The protagonist of Gaddis’ novel, an eleven year-old boy called JR (for “Junior”) is more like an intersection of forces than an individual, yet he is successful because he is also a master in handling the instruments of the system and its forms of doing business; he is thus the interface of its codifications—and he is finally the parody of the system, as well. He shrewdly plays the capitalist system by its own rules, by speculation, by buying and selling at the right time in order to maximize the profit. With his business ingenuity, and helped by lucky coincidences, JR establishes a huge nationwide conglomerate, his “family of companies” (the term “family” in fact pointing out the incongruity between sentiment and actual business practices). Doing business involves a great amount of action and cleverness in choosing the right action, but only a minimum of reflection about effects and goals beyond money and success. *JR* is a “telephone novel” (Lewicki 106) since the protagonist has to hide his age and therefore can operate only by telephone. He has an uptown business office in an apartment on 96th street; his business representative living in the apartment is the artist/composer Edward Bast. The apartment symbolizes the final state of *entropy*, the exhaustion of the System, the transformation of order into chaos. Speaking of both the chaotic “uptown office” of the JR Corporation on 96th street, and the runaway situation of the (business) world in general, Gibbs, the failed writer, says: “Problem Bast there’s too God damned much leakage around here, can’t compose anything with all this energy spilling you’ve got entropy going everywhere. Radio leaking under there hot water pouring out so God damned much entropy going on” (287). Under these circumstances, again in Gibbs’ words, “[o]rder is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos” (20).



*JR* is a novel almost exclusively in the form of (fragmented) dialogues, a montage of verbal exchanges heard in offices, conferences, on telephones, even in toilets. The book contains approximately 180 telephone conversations or telephone monologues (to use the telephone for doing business, JR has only to let his child's voice sound deeper and older via a cassette recorder, played more slowly). The reified ritual of communication, however, produces in the business world only fragments, noise, or waste by a "God damned complex of messages" (403). According to Gaddis, the novel is "a commentary on this free enterprise system running out of control" (Abadi-Nagy 60). Running out of control means that the self-propelling system finally collapses in the waste, the chaos it produces, becomes entropic. The crash of JR's "Paper Empire" (651) is representative of what happens or will happen to the system as a whole. The collapse results from the lack of reference to reality, the self-referential abstractedness of the games of speculation, and manipulation. Excess in codifying the games of business leads to a "'decodification' of all codes" (Durand 1980, 49). The novel reflects this state of affairs by being itself a kind of "runaway system" (LeClair 1981, 592),<sup>139</sup> without division into chapters, without quotation marks or clear demarcation of speakers, without a guiding principle like plot or character. For the traditional forms (the linear principles of suspense, causality, and logical sequence), the reigning compositional method substitutes the rules of "spatiality", simultaneity, and equality of all signifiers and signifieds. They create their own chaotic force, which paradoxically produces the end of all force and form, entropy. Correspondingly, the aesthetic program is complemented with an unaesthetic one. The excess of linguistic signs, their deficiency of structure, the lack of a hierarchy of values approach the status of noninformation, nonunderstandability that comprises the whole invented world.

*Entropy* and the *void* are close relatives; both are adverse to a balance of order and disorder. Entropy signifies chaos, the void nothingness. The system is defined by entropy or the approach of entropy. The character or the reader experiences the abyss, the void. Business activity in excess fills the world and covers the void. By expanding to the exclusion of everything else, business activities and its values of "just doing" here do not only foster entropy; they also produce a human vacuum, the void. The teacher Amy Joubert, a kind

of moral authority in the book, realizes that JR's energy, his thirst for action, for "just doing", responds to "something quite desolate, like a hunger" (247), the hunger for something that is worth doing. JR's failure to see anything but money and success-values is also a failure of the system that does not give access to any other, artistic, spiritual or religious values and activities, or at least denies them social relevance (Cates to Beaton: "Not talking about any damn ethics Beaton talking about the price of the damn stock" [435]). As the businessman Moncrieff tells JR's school class: "Well I'd just say boys and girls, as long as you're in the game you may as well play to win" (107). Cates instructs his lawyers in the way business is done: "I'm telling you what I'm doing and you find how to do it that's all" (470). Beaton says about the word "charity": "Yes well I use it in its tax law connotation" (212). When Edward Bast raises objections against JR's plans, JR's stereotypical answer is the clichéd idea of doing: "No but holy shit Bast I didn't invent it I mean this is what you do!" (466) JR has fully understood the rules of the system and its doings; they are simply rules for doing, without ethical relevance: "These laws are these laws why should we want to do something illegal if some law lets us do it anyway [...]. I mean these are these laws which you're supposed to find out exactly the letter of them and that's what we do exactly the letter!" (470-71) These laws, for instance, allow JR's business firm Ray-X, which makes toys, to supply a rebellious African tribe with plastic arms, the result being that it is massacred by government troops. When one of his business operations is praised by the press as a "shrewd move by downstate financial interest", JR asks: "I mean shrewd financial interests what are they trying to say we screwed them?" (293) Since he has no core of his own and is in fact the mere instrument of business procedures, of empty forms and forces (greed for money, power), and the intersection of public discourses (in hiding), he has no way of self-definition and needs, and is delighted to be defined by the press as a person of vision and action, of "just doing".

The counter-position to business practices and their moral of "just doing" is the attitude of the *artist* who asks, "*what is worth doing?*" There are a number of artists in the book, the writer Jack Gibbs, who plans to write "a book about order and disorder more of a sort of a social history of mechanization and the arts, the destructive element" (244), but cannot do it; or Thomas Eigen, who, in Gibbs'

words, “finally found everything around him getting so God damned real he couldn’t see straight long enough to write a sentence” (492), or Schramm, who commits suicide because, as Gibbs says:

Christ look can’t you see it wasn’t any of that! it was, it was worse than that? It was whether what he was trying to do was worth doing even if he couldn’t do it? whether anything was worth writing even if he couldn’t write it? Hopping around with that God damned limp trying to turn it all into something more than one more stupid tank battle one more stupid God damned general, trying to redeem the whole God damned thing by (621).

The most important artist figure is Edward Bast, who is a character at the crossroads, an artist who believes in “[t]he height of the artist’s claim” (255), and at the same time acts as the business representative of JR’s “Family of Corporations”. He has moral and artistic problems. His problem as a moral person who considers *integrative morality* as the basis of identity (a nostalgic idea) is the *division* of morals (of which Max Weber spoke), namely that the economic/social system has developed a code of its own, oriented towards success and money values, and that this business mentality has nothing in common with Christian morals or the biddings of a personal conscience. There is no unified and unifying ethical code of behavior. Separating the spheres of human activity and their values, JR tells Bast, “I mean this isn’t any popularity contest hey” (296). Besides the opposition business-morality there is the other one, *money-spirituality*. Here the relation between the two poles is different. While business and morality are rigidly separated, though they should be interconnected, spirituality and art are fused with business, though they should be separate. The fact that business and art are not separate but closely allied frustrates Bast in his role as an artist. For the defeat of his highflying expectations he makes responsible JR and his kind: “you can’t get up to their [the artists’] level so you drag them down to yours if there’s any way to ruin something, to degrade it to cheapen it” (659).

But art is criticized too, here as in Coover’s *The Public Burning*, and in many other postmodern narratives, for instance in Barthelme’s texts. Bast indulges in the cliché of the romantic artist without living up to the high claim that comes with it, at least not in his work in progress which does not show the invigorating force of art, the saving energy of human redemption, and never gets finished.

He is placed in the middle of a number of contradictions whose interface he is. As the leading business representative of a large Corporation, he does not pay any attention to the money to which he is entitled, but then he takes on additional jobs as artist that mock his claim to artistic autonomy. Furthermore, though he claims to be an artist and acts like one, he cannot meaningfully define the position of the artist in clearly aesthetic terms that alone could open up an autonomous space for him, could give the force art a dignified place of its own in the world. He falls back on a vague, personal necessity-of-“doing” argument that just repeats weakly an exhausted modernist cliché and is in fact parodied by paralleling the “just-doing” philosophy of business. Only when Bast is told in the hospital by a dying stranger: “You don’t even know what failure is at your age how can you call yourself one when you’ve never done anything” (672), is he finally ready to give up his stultifying obsession and to realize that the exaggerated claim he made only leads to empty pretension and excludes the freedom of choice:

I was thinking there’s so much that’s not worth doing suddenly I thought maybe I’ll never do anything. That’s what scared me I always thought I’d be, this music I always thought I had to write music all of a sudden I thought what if I don’t, maybe I don’t have to I’d never thought of that maybe I don’t! (687)

In this final turn, “doing” and “not doing” balance each other. Nothing is worth doing when it results from an obsession, either with business or with art. On the other hand, doing can be made worth doing by making it so. Important as a guide-line is: “doing what’s there to be done as though it’s worth doing” (687); the “as though” phrase compares with the “as if” formula in Barth’s “Anonymiad”, though the contexts are different. Bast throws his notes into the waste-basket, but takes them back out “[b]ecause it’s all I’ve got!” (718) Yet his spirit is changed; now it is less pretentious, more modest in its claim, without demand of perfection, a guarantee of meaning. Again it is doing, not thinking, that is the clue. The value of doing is split. Doing finally has a good “organic” and a bad “mechanic” meaning.

#### 7.14.5. Voodoo-Aesthetics, and Action as Life Force: Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

Among the most important aspects of postmodern fiction and its view of America are, as illustrated in the cases discussed above, the antitheses action-entropy and action-thought. Ishmael Reed, an African-American writer, chooses action over thought. He practices what he calls Neo-HooDoo art as a challenge to authority, to dead Western history and death-like Western cultural values, which end in *entropy*. Against (white) society and history, their traditions and value systems is set *Life* as the alternative value. Since life is exuberance and excess, Reed's art is an art of fantastic *excess*, an excess of action, events, and activity in general. Tony Tanner, referring to Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, another book of excess, makes a telling remark as to the purpose of excess in postmodern fiction. The (excessive) "length of his book is the tenure of his [the author's] freedom" (1971, 248).

In Reed's book it is the excess of *nature* that frees the human being from (Western) civilizational bondage. This is unusual in the postmodern novel. Yet the attitude is different with African-American and Native American fiction (see, for instance, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*). Actually, Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* gains its viewpoint from the confrontation of mind and body, consciousness and unconsciousness, regulation and liberation, power and resistance, thought and action, form and force. Action is split in its meaning. Action as affirmation of life (and resistance against authority) is indissolubly connected with creativity and anarchy, with expression, i.e., expression of the life force, as it manifests itself in dance and music, particularly black music like ragtime, jazz, blues, i.e., in the joy of living. Action as affirmation is set against action as violence and repression, perpetrated by the System and its institutions. In a reversal of the action story of Western "civilization", action in the liberating sense here has no story and is indeed the liberation from the allegedly sterile, manœuvring, and controlling civilizational story of action as improvement; it is the deliverance from reflection, motivation, manipulation, stereotyped evaluation according to Western tradition and its prejudices; it is the spontaneous eruption of life's *energies*. Action in this liberating sense of force is not part of a logical chain: it

is “*situational*”. Its values and frames of reference replace society and culture, discipline, and thought with life and energy, with happiness in being and uninhibited expression of emotion. Reed’s novels — in contrast to other postmodern writers — do not dissolve the duality of existence but emphasize it, though they demand in a kind of utopian spirit the unity of the social and the natural spheres, at least as the goal of thinking and acting. Reed uses the postmodern strategies of fantastication and comicalization to alleviate the constructed oppositions without displacing them. He places them in a specific historic time and within his version of the history of civilization from the ancient Egypt of Osiris to the Harlem Renaissance.

Reed chooses the time from 1915-23, especially the Harding years. The thematic frame is the rise and expansion of the so-called “Jes Grew” conspiracy from New Orleans across the United States to New York. It is a fantasized black or black-power movement subversive of the white mainstream establishment and is connected with ragtime, jazz and blues. People in power experience the movement as a terrifying event, a “thing” that makes people into “cases”. Already on the first pages, the System’s functionaries in New York describe the symptoms of being stricken by this event as being seized by the need to act, to feel, to perceive, to hear, and to speak. The symptoms of “Jes Grew”, “once dormant, [...] now a Creeping Thing” (5), are that “people were doing ‘stupid sensual things,’ were in a state of ‘uncontrollable frenzy,’ were wriggling like fish, doing something called the ‘Eagle Rock’ and the ‘Sassy Bump’; were cutting a mean ‘Mooche,’ and ‘lusting after relevance” (6). Having no form of its own, this invigorating force, this “mumbo jumbo”, is a “case occurring in 1 neighborhood and picking up in another. It began to leapfrog all about us”. This “Jes Grew” is a “*psychic epidemic*”, it is “nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we call it 1 thing it forms into something else” (7). While for the adherents of the System Jes Grew is a terrifying event, it is for the stricken “patient” a primordial feeling: “He said he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa’s interior. He said he felt like the Kongo: ‘Land of the Panther!’ He said he felt like ‘deserting his master,’ as the Kongo is ‘prone to do.’ He said he felt he could dance on a dime” (8). Asked what he hears, he lists “shank bones, jew’s harps, bagpipes, flutes, conch horns, drums, banjos, kazoos”. In his

utterances, “[h]e started to speak in tongues” (8). The conclusion leaves no doubt: “There are no isolated cases in this thing. It knows no class no race no consciousness. It is self-propagating and you can never tell when it will hit”. Indeed, “6 of them [JG cases] are some of the most distinguished bacteriologists epidemiologists and chemists from the University” (8). Even the “Mayor feels that uncomfortable sensation at the nape and soon he is doing something resembling the symptoms of Jes Grew, and the Doctor who rushes to his aid starts slipping dipping gliding on out of doors and into the streets”. Yet the “*Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. [...] Jes Grew enlivened the host. [...] Jes Grew is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy. [...] Jes Grew is the delight of the gods*” (8-9). The conflict in the country is between “2,000 years of probing classifying attempting to make an ‘orderly’ world” (175) and that which has been suppressed in the process, life. And “Jes Grew is life. [...] They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper” (233). Yet Jes Grew as life-force needs a human *form*, and form is given it by a text, a “Book of Litanies”, written in the mythic times of Isis and Osiris.

This “Book of Litanies” is the object of both plot and counterplot. As mentioned, the action-concept is split. There are repressive actions of the authorities that are directed against the Jes Grew-“infected” victims and are experienced by them as stifling events. The repressive actions result in three murders and uncounted cases of interference, violence, and obstruction. But action calls up reaction, and power is answered with resistance. Both power and resistance work openly and secretly, as conspiracy and counter-conspiracy. Reed’s novel employs the detective formula, which suits Reed perfectly, since “[b]eing a Negro in this society means reading motives in a complicated way” (*Shr* 13). On the one hand, “*Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?*” (9) On the other, this historic Text is sought by those who wish to destroy it in order to weaken the “plague”. The history of The Book, which is important because it gives the Jes Grew movement — apart from the activities of the present — a universal perspective, a historical viewpoint, and a textual form, is traced through the repetitive, cyclical movements of rigid patterning and pattern-breaking in history from Egypt via Christianity to the present. After a time characterized by the liberating spirit of affirmation and joy, of

dancing, singing, and respecting the mysteries of life in the spirit of Osiris and Isis, follows a time in which Set, the brother and enemy of Osiris, “the deity of the modern clerk, always tabulating” (185), and his followers, the Atonists, make every effort to repress the freedom of life in favor of form, of categorization, regulation, and goal-directed striving, against which the people then rebel in the spirit of Force and of Life. Art is not the expression of social order and is not subject to regulating aesthetic standards but is, as force, the subversion of them, the refusal to accept their authority. Concomitantly, *The Book*, written down in antique times by the artist Thoth, contains the record of the choreography of Osiris’ dances; it is called “A Book of Litanies”, the “Book of Thoth”, or just “The Work”, and is intended “to feed the spirits that were seizing the people” (187), to teach people “the Osirian Art” (192), “to permit nature to speak and dance” (188): as form it serves to avoid outbreaks of harmful disorder that could give a pretext for repressive measures by the Atonists, especially the Atonist Christian Church.

On labyrinthine paths the Sacred Book has come to New York. It is in the possession of Hinckle Von Vampton, the librarian of the order of the Knights Templar, founded in 1118, who has discovered it in a secret passageway of its headquarters, the Temple of Solomon. Hinckle, having found a way to evade death, is now in New York. Afraid of the Book’s power to raise Jes Grew movements wherever it is placed and also to evade detection, “[h]e selected 14 J.G.C.s and paid them a monthly salary just to send the Text around to each other in a chain, each time changing the covering so that the authorities wouldn’t get suspicious” (217). Using the fear of those who know the Book’s magic power to raise the rebellious force of Jes Grew, Hinckle forces “[t]he Wallflower Order, a secret society of enforcers, established when the Atonists triumphed in the West”, to destroy the evidence that led to the trial of the Templars in 1307 and the disbanding of their order. “He made a deal with them to the effect that his Order would have to be in charge of the Crusade against Jes Grew in order for him to return the Book”. At the end the Book is in the possession of Abdul Hamid, the voice of the New Negro, to whom, for no clear reason, “1 of the 14 people on the list [of Hinckle’s circulators of “The Work”] [...] gave the book” (217), and who is killed because his murderers think he has it. The irony is that he has destroyed the Sacred Book, the reason being, as he says in



a letter written before his death to Papa LaBas, a magician, an “activist” of the Voodoo rites and a prophet of Jes Grew, that after translating it “I have decided that black people could never have been involved in such a lewd, nasty, decadent thing as is depicted here” (231). With the destruction of the Book, the Jes Grew movement suddenly recedes, but Papa LaBas knows that Jes Grew is not bound to a fixed Text, that on the contrary it is pure Force, and as such

has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now. Jes Grew may even have caused the ball to explode. We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. You see, life will never end [...]. They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this (233).

The fantastification of the world and the satiric, grotesque, and comic perspectives here combine to indict and to ridicule the Western belief in systematization and rigid patterning, in the tradition of fixed values. Though Reed despises the patternings of the Atonist Freud, he uses the antitheses of consciousness and unconsciousness, of thought and instinct, of planning and spontaneity, to build up the dichotomies of Civilization- Life/Nature, Form-Force that characterize the human being individually and universally, and that determine human history and the relationship between the mainstream and the minorities/ethnic groups. However, the playfulness of Reed’s approach bestows on his novels, in addition to their satirical aggressiveness, an overall sense of liberation. *Excess* in the games of the imagination is a special product of voodooism; it opens up a way out of the stifling atmosphere of social anonymity and imprisonment, but also out of the either-or paradigm of social criticism into the playful plurisignification of postmodern fiction.

The possible is the realm of the imagination, which is conceptualized in the history of ideas in different ways, depending on the thought system of which it is part. The imagination is central for romantic, modern, and postmodern art, but in quite divergent ways. It seems pertinent that we complete our study after the analysis of the various separate aspects of postmodern narrative with a synthesizing view of New Fiction, returning to the overview of the beginning chapters, now however, under different aspects. Nothing can serve our purpose of summing up the central aspects of postmodern fiction

better than an examination of the conception, the structure, and the function of the imagination in postmodern times. We will dedicate the next chapter to this task. This is followed by an overview of the perspectives of incongruity and negation that we mentioned at the beginning and had referred to many times: satire, the grotesque, play, parody, irony, and the comic mode. Here we will define them systematically and set them in relation to one another, though a more detailed study has to wait for another book, which is in progress.

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## 8. The Imagination

### 8.1. The Imagination and the Imaginary

The driving force behind the creation of aesthetic worlds is the imagination. Because of its many conceptualizations or, more precisely, because of the “three basic paradigms that permeate its history”, namely “foundational discourse”, “combining activity”, and “independent faculty”, imagination has always been a vague and difficult phenomenon. Its indefinability does not spring “solely from the inadequacy of discourse” but rather from the fact that the imagination “has no identity of its own; as itself it appears to be indeterminate” (Iser 1993, 180-81). Serving historical needs by uncovering or at least marking the ungraspable, the imagination is in fact dynamic and transformative, crosses the threshold of partitions, fills the space left vacant by perception and reason, includes emotion and desire; according to Kohler in *The Tunnel*, “the imagination [is] guided by feeling, fueled by desire” (591). It composes the immanent and transcendent, the familiar and the unfamiliar, past, present, and future, giving wide range to the virtual compared to the actual.<sup>140</sup> “Hume and Kant regarded this faculty as something mysterious and, in the final analysis, impenetrable. But when, in late classicism and early Romanticism, the subject and its self-realization became the all-important issues, imagination was given such concise definitions that it appeared to be knowable; and it advanced to the head of the faculty hierarchy” (Iser 1993, 181-82).<sup>141</sup>

The idea of the primacy of an autonomous imagination has been rejected by the structuralists and poststructuralists, together with the notion of an imagining subject as a transcendental source of meaning, as advocated by philosophers like Kant, Schelling, Husserl and Sartre. Many postmodern theorists “regard imagination as a mystified and mystifying bourgeois notion, a romantic way of concealing the real roots of creativity which reach down not into some dark inner world but into that ideology which it is the radical critic’s task to demystify” (Washington 163). Deconstruction de-

centers and devalues the concepts of the autonomous imagination. For Lacan, the imaginary is a narcissistic illusion:

The Imaginary Order includes the field of phantasies and images. It evolves out of the mirror stage, but extends into the adult subject's relationships with others. The prototype of the typical imaginary relationship is the infant before the mirror, fascinated with his image. Adult narcissistic relationships [...] are seen as extensions of the infantile situation. The Imaginary Order also seems to include pre-verbal structures, for example, the various "primitive" phantasies uncovered by the psychoanalytic treatment of children, psychotic and perverse patients (1986, 81).

Althusser and others relate Lacan's concept of the imagination to ideology in the sense of false consciousness. As an imaginary assemblage, the imagination is a "structure of misrecognition" (Althusser 219).<sup>142</sup> If, as radical poststructuralist positions hold, the human being does not speak or write language, but rather language speaks and writes the deconstructed transcendental subject, then the concept of original imagination as the source of meaning loses its foundation in literature, where it is de-psychologized, made the product of intertextuality. For Roland Barthes, "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977, 146); it is the product of "multiple writings [...] entering into neutral relations of [...] parody" (148). In a world of simulacra, human consciousness still produces images, but, Foucault says, referring to Andy Warhol's serigraphs of consumer items, "the image itself, along with a name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell" (1983, 54). Derrida, one of the most rigorous deconstructionists, cannot accept the imagination as the exclusive generator of creativity. Instead of the imagination as unifying and meaning-giving origin of creativity, we have merely the "mirror of a mirror [...] a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth or presence" (1988a, 206). We have the "image without model, [...] without verisimilitude, without truth or falsity, a miming of appearance without concealed reality, without any world behind it" (211). However one evaluates it, the imagination manifests itself in different ways, blurring its profile. Since such a multifaceted potential can be explored only in terms of its aspects, it is scarcely surprising that the history of imagination, or fantasy, frequently

involves irreconcilable discourses, concerned sometimes with its grounding, sometimes with its status as *ars combinatoria* (which creates images of the world, calls up the past in the present, and wanders off into its own, imaginative worlds), and sometimes with its status as a faculty (Iser 1993, 171). Because of the problematic status of the imagination, and because of the mounting skepticism concerning its “true” nature, another, more “neutral”, descriptive term has been introduced: the “*imaginary*”.

For simplicity’s sake we will continue to employ the term imagination, even in its reduced status. This makes a comparison with Kant easier and at the same time does justice to the fact that there are also models of the imagination, which, though they do not interpret the imagination any longer as innate faculty, use it as an instrument of postmodern hermeneutics. Richard Kearney, referring to Ricoeur, writes: “The conclusion of such a radical hermeneutic is that a post-modern imagination is one which has no choice but to recognize that it is unfounded [sans fondements]. It no longer seeks an ontological foundation *in itself* as transcendental subject, or *outside itself* in some timeless substance. But it does not, for all that, necessarily find itself without purpose. This task always remains: to interpret the images of the other and to transfigure one’s own image of the world in response to this interpretation” (1991, 180). This interpretation always occurs with a “watchful eye for the ruptures and the breaks and the irregularities in existence” (Caputo 1987, 1). After the imagination has lost the status of an independent, integrative faculty, it now has to be defined within an additional frame of reference.

For Julia Kristeva, for instance, “loss, mourning, absence set the imaginary act in motion and permanently fuel it as much as they menace and undermine it”. The “melancholic imagination” is “reuniting with sorrow and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never attained, always elsewhere; such are the promises of the void, of death”. But the “literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary efficacy that, concerned more with catharsis than elaboration, is a therapeutic method utilized in all societies throughout the ages” (1988, 14, 15, 16). In *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancholie*, Kristeva then offers what she calls “l’imaginaire du pardon”, which is “the transposition of destructive experience into aesthetic form” (Kearney 1991, 190). Speaking of the “postmodern

challenge”, she says: “Henceforth it is a matter regarding the ‘sickness of suffering’ as a moment in the *narrative synthesis* which is capable of importing into its complex whirlpool philosophical meditations as well as erotic defenses or pleasurable distractions. Postmodernity is closer to the *comédie humaine* than to the *malaise abyssal* [...] Today the desire for comedy comes to recover — without ignoring — the scruple of this truth without tragedy, this melancholy without purgatory” (qtd. in Kearney 1991, 192). In her view *play*, together with the comic mode, comes to the fore: “I am someone else. I cannot say who. There are things that cannot be said, and I am entitled to play around with them so that I can understand them better”. For postmodern literature to fulfill its therapeutic function, it is necessary, according to Kristeva, “to reawaken the imagination and permit illusions to exist” (1987, 51, 18); and “the realm of imagination [is] play, and possibility, where even calculation becomes renewal and creation” (62).

Like Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo pleads for a ludic imagining that can play with the “demythicization of demythification [which] can be considered [as] the true and proper moment of transition from the modern to the postmodern” (1985, 35). For Lyotard the “narrative imagination” is the means of resisting the claims of “grand narratives”, of totalizing ideologies. Again it is narrative play that constitutes the activity of the imagination, but this play is not reducible to the mere “dissemination” of signifiers, as with Derrida and Lacan, or to the artifice of parody. The function of the imagination is not to attain consensus and unity but *disconsensus and difference*. It keeps the space open for the *unknowable and unrepresentable*: “Let us wage a war on totality [...]; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (Lyotard 1984c, 82). This establishes an ethics of imaginary play: difference and justice. Lyotard compares the discourse of the “narrative imagination” with Kant’s *Third Critique*: “You will note that this discourse, if it is correct, cannot be *true* as a theory pretends to be: it is no longer a meta-narrative, even a critical one. It has itself become a work of art, one where imagination wants itself to be imagination” (qtd. in Kearney 1991, 200). Most postmodern writers would agree with this idea.

Summing up the gist of the quoted statements on the postmodern imagination (or the imaginary), one can note, first, in

negative terms, that the imagination now *refuses totalizing ideas* like identity and reality, and criticizes (fixed) conventions and ideologies; second, in positive terms, it *affirms possibility, difference, and the other*, the ineffable and the unrepresentable as that which the imagination should suggest and keep open; and, third, play is the performer of the imagination, but as a kind of *free play* that includes, or rather opens up space for the modes of irony, parody, and the comic mode, all of which deconstruct unities, totalities, and false beliefs and renew the world in terms of possibility. Federman defines postmodern fiction, in his phrase “surfiction”, as “that kind of fiction that challenges the traditions that govern it; the kind of fiction that constantly renews our faith in man’s imagination and not in man’s distorted reality — that reveals man’s irrationality rather than man’s rationality. This I call SUR-FICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality” (1975, 34). Hawkes remarks: “I’ve insisted that the subject of my work after *The Lime Twig* has been the imagination itself”, the imagination of the narrator being “both creator and destroyer” (Ziegler and Bigsby 177). For the characterization of the postmodern imagination, one might adopt Lawrence Alloway’s description of pop art as a general cultural phenomenon that is directed by “speculative rather than [...] a contemplative [i.e., modern] esthetics” (1975, 122).<sup>143</sup>

## 8.2. Kant and the Postmodern Imagination: The Beautiful and the Sublime

The general traits of the postmodern imagination can be made more specific in a comparison with Kant, a comparison that illustrates historical changes in the imagination’s function and, specifically, in its concrete postmodern features, and also reveals the doubts of the New Fiction writers about its efficacy in achieving its goal, after it has lost the status of a faculty and its center, the transcendental subject. Kant was the first to consider the creative role of the aesthetic imagination worthy of being called a faculty of its own in a philosophic system, as having an independent, equally entitled function among the faculties of the mind. Kant’s definition has influenced all the following definitions of the imagination, especially the Romantic ones of Schelling, Coleridge, Wordsworth,



Poe, etc. This elevation of imaginative activity, if not the imagination as faculty, is for the postmodern writers (as for the modernist authors) the basis for their own arguments. William Gass says of himself (with certain qualifications) “I’m a Kantian” (Ziegler and Bigsby 162). Kant sees in the imagination a *form* principle that has *mediating* power. The three dimensions of the imagination are bridge-builders between sense-data and image, image and the categories of understanding, and image and reason. In the *Transcendental Deduction*, Kant notes:

What is first given to us is appearance. When combined with consciousness it is called perception. Now since every appearance contains a manifold, and since different perceptions therefore occur in the mind separately and singly, a combination of them *such as they cannot have in sense* is demanded. There must therefore exist in us an active faculty for the synthesis of the manifold. To this faculty I give the name Imagination (qtd. in Warnock 28).

This is the point from which all the other definitions of the imagination start because whatever the imagination does, its function is to create a synthesis of the manifold on the various levels of integration. Kant distinguishes three types or dimensions of the imagination: (1) the *empirical imagination*, which provides a “reproductive synthesis”, and is “entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws, namely of association” and “falls within the domain not of transcendental philosophy but of psychology”; (2) the *transcendental imagination* which is “productive” and constructive, active and spontaneous, in short, “determinative and not, like sense, determinable merely”; and (3) the *aesthetic imagination*, which “determines sense *a priori* in respect of its form” (qtd. in Warnock 30).

(1) As the longer quotation shows, the imagination in its first dimension is the synthetic faculty of consciousness that *connects* isolated perception-data, the “appearances” into images, unities in time and space, and, by giving the manifold its basic imaginative form, thus “prepares” them for the causal processes of the mind. Postmodern fiction makes use of the synthetic form-giving ability of the imagination on the level of the image (in our terms, the situation), but it uses this ability of construction to introduce force, to deconstruct and reconstruct the image in non-Kantian terms. There are three methods of accomplishing this goal. The first strategy is

Robbe-Grillet's: images of the material surface are supplied in abundance, but they are not prepared for further processing by the categories of the mind, thus leaving a gap between the image and its meaning. The reader is left to his or her own guesses when he or she follows the indeterminate clues placed in the text. The second method is illustrated by Barthelme's "picture" stories, like "The Balloon" or "The Glass Mountain"; they indeed create images as *gestalts* and thus prepare the mind-processing of the sense-data, but the image is a construct that defies the categories of understanding; it resists being assimilated by the rationalizing processes of consciousness, which fail in grasping the ungraspable. The third strategy, again typical of many of Barthelme's narratives, deconstructs the image-forming power of the imagination at its basis by a diagrammatic method. It does not fill the situation with image-formed sense-data but with discrepancies and juxtapositions of a factual kind that, because of their unsolvable contradictions, cannot be processed by the categories of understanding. In all three cases, negation of synthesis has a double thrust. It turns against the concept of mimesis on the one hand and, on the other, against rationalization. This makes the imaginary product fantastic.

(2) The transcendental imagination is the bridge that connects images with the intellect, makes them accessible to the power of understanding and its categories of rationalization. In postmodern fiction, the "good" continuation of apprehension from the image to the processes of understanding is impeded not only because the image-forming power of the imagination does not produce coherent and "probable" images but also because the categories of the mind, especially causality, have been deconstructed. The rationalizing processes of consciousness are disturbed, interrupted, dissolved playfully, comically, full of irony, at any point of the logic chain and are turned into the opposite of the expected. Transcendental reflection can lead consciousness into the dead end of antinomies and paradoxa. Similar things happen to the transcendental imagination. Its ability to represent an object in the mind without its actually being present, i.e., its ability to *remember*, is thwarted. It is no longer able to recall objects, circumstances, persons, and events of the past, prepare them for, and connect them with, thought and emotion. Proust and the modernist stream-of-consciousness novel (Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Faulkner) base the notion of identity on memory as

permanence in time. The character in postmodern fiction often surrenders or cancels this kind of psychic time that would establish subjective, emotional, and reflexive continuity and coherence. Memory loses the ability to create emotional centers as focal points, to design an "inner biography" (Brautigan, Barthelme), or it becomes the instrument for an excessive, often hallucinatory obsession with an event in the past (Pynchon, *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*). With the loss of the ability of memory and emotion to integrate the past, action also loses its subjective focal point. Since its chain of motivation rests on the continuity and permanence of the character, the loss of temporal sequentiality turns action into something contingent, into an event looked at, so to speak, from outside. Finally, from the viewpoint of consciousness, the imagination can be seen, as in Beckett's "Imagination Dead Imagine", to include by the processes of radical irony, paradoxically its own self-destruction or rather the self-destruction of its manifestations. This self-destruction of the imaginary unity is meant to prevent being ossified and neutralized by their being "thematized", or rather, interpreted by reflection. Thus, again paradoxically, the self-destruction of its results saves the imagination as a mobile force. It produces something out of a pre-actualized nothingness by a continuous process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, itself remaining, again paradoxically, a force in a void, "dead", if you will, in its manifestations, but not in its dynamics. The relation of the imagination to transcendental reflection is ambivalent. On the one hand, the interpretative designs of reflection endanger the openness of the imaginary constructs by reflection's tendency of reaching for closure. On the other hand, the mobility of the thinking-process itself parallels that of the imagination. Thus tension and mutual support characterize the relation between the two.

(3) The aesthetic imagination is, of course, a special case. The latter has a bridge-function, too. In *Critique of Judgment* Kant speaks of three faculties of the mind: understanding, reason, and judgment. "The faculty by which we apply scientific concepts to nature, is, he says, the understanding; that by which we apply laws to our experience of freedom, is reason; and between these two lies the faculty of judgment" (Warnock 43). There is judgment in the general sense in which the application of the categories of understanding are also judgments. Judgment in the narrow sense, however, is

“reflective judgment”, which does not impose a preformed concept upon sense-perceptions but becomes active in a situation “where only a particular is given, and the universal has to be found for it” (qtd. in Warnock 43). Kant gives examples from the natural sciences and from aesthetics. The reflexive judgment in the sciences finds pattern in nature; the aim and result of the aesthetic judgment, which is not intellectual, is the perception of *aesthetic form* or pattern in the appearance of an object, e.g., in the way an object looks. This perception of form is the aesthetic foundation of symbolic thinking and of the symbolic method in literature.

Within the category of the aesthetic imagination, Kant isolates and relates to one another two aesthetic forms, the beautiful and the sublime. The *beautiful* is seen as possessed by a finality of form. Kant speaks here of a “purposiveness without purpose” (“Zweckhaftigkeit ohne Zweck”), its purpose being not external but internal to itself. The purposiveness of the beautiful, experienced in soothing formations of nature and art, is to express a certain form and thus to display order, and this inner finality of purpose gives satisfaction and pleasure, albeit a particular kind of pleasure. The tender social pleasure that is derived from the aesthetic judgment, the judgment on a satisfying design resting in itself, comes from “the harmonious interplay of understanding and imagination” (qtd. in Warnock 47). The fact that an object is conceived as beautiful contains not only a subjective judgment but also implies a universal, objective, aesthetic consensus in what Kant calls “taste”. The universality and objectivity of the aesthetic judgment are based on the assumption that the faculties of understanding and imagination have their place in everyone’s mind, thus are universal. A certain enhancement of the concept of imagination in its aesthetic function becomes evident, but the parallel to the function of the imagination in perception is not lost: “Imagination in aesthetic judgment, as an ordinary perception, has the function of reducing the chaos of sensation to order. But in the aesthetic contemplation of an object, the order is, as it were, internal to the image” (Kant 1951, 240). The imagination in its aesthetic function is still representational in that it makes one feel the order of the image that is “there”; but it is free inasmuch as it is “productive, and exerting an activity of its own”. The imagination in its “free play” (244) is here primary in the sense that it is free from serving the understanding; rather, “the

understanding is at the service of the imagination". The concept of *freedom* that is here, for the first time, integrated with that of imagination is the basis for the postmodern notion of imagination (though, of course, without the Kantian restrictions). So is the idea of "play". The idea of "free play" is taken up by Derrida and post-modern fiction and is made absolute.

With Kant the "free play" of the imagination, however, is not restricted to revealing comprehensible and limited patterns and designs in objects that it judges aesthetically beautiful. It can also free itself from the self-imposed task of finding the rules of design and pattern in the object and thus of cooperating with the understanding. It can find pleasure in an object that is not beautiful "because of its form". In this case the imagination is "not estimating the beautiful, but estimating the sublime" (qtd. in Warnock 52). Kant follows here the distinction of the beautiful and the sublime that was made in English critical theory of the eighteenth century, especially by Burke. Kant takes up Burke's differentiation, though he criticizes its empirical and psychological definition, as well as its being centered on the physical subject. By aligning them with the concepts of the imagination, of understanding and pure reason, Kant gives beauty and the sublime and the differentiation between the two a far-reaching status in his philosophical system. He notes: "Natural beauty [...] brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, pre-adapted to our judgment [...] that which excites in us [...] the feeling of the sublime may appear, as regards its form, to violate purpose in respect of the judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty, and as it were to do violence to the imagination" (*Judgment* 1951, 83).

While Edmund Burke speaks of "[t]he passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully" (57), Kant emphasizes that the sublime is located not in the object but in the beholder's eye, in the subject's aesthetic judgment: "Sublimity [...] does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we can become conscious that we are superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us (so far as it influences us)" (1951, 104). After the violation of the imagination in the first stage of the sublime experience, the self in the second stage mobilizes its own energies, returns to its true self, and overcomes the threat from nature by reflection: "we willingly

call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature” (Kant 1951, 100-101). The sublime “discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of and a superiority over nature, on which is based a kind of self-preservation entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature. Thus humanity in our person remains unhumiliated, though the individual might have to submit to this dominion” (101). *Energy* and *judgment* appear as the two “positive” factors of the sublime, which carry its first stage over to the second. In the second, contemplative phase of the sublime, which in Kant’s terms constitutes the “real” sublime, the belief in reason, buttressed by the belief in God’s reason and goodness, comes to the support of the overwhelmed imagination.

Kant stresses the *contradictory structure* of the sublime. The delight in the sublime feeling results from its contradictions and its process-oriented and energizing structure, from what Schiller called its “magic with which it captures our minds” (200), which makes for the charm of the sublime. As an aesthetic category, the sublime encompasses at least four polarities, whose dominant in literature and art can change: (1) the sensuous vs. the spiritual; (2) feeling vs. thinking or imagination vs. reason; (3) terror vs. delight; and (4) humankind vs. God. Depending on the firmness of the belief in God (and reason), either the safety in God and universal reason (and the feeling of pleasure/bliss) is emphasized, or the overpowering force of the imagination and the exposure to the unknown (and the feeling of terror and human insignificance, i.e., pain) can come to the fore. The result is a “light” and a “dark” sublime.<sup>144</sup> The light sublime causes terror only in a more latent, subdued state, while the “dark” sublime brings it out into the open and emphasizes doubt and struggle, as in the case of Ahab’s refusing the “light”, synthesizing sublime vision of nature in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. The sublime as an attitude and literary perspective is *paradoxical* (see Pries 6). It represents something unrepresentable and therefore attempts the impossible. It rests on the force of reason for its synthesis, and it needs God as guarantor of security. The human being can only be certain of God via the ideas and ideals of pure reason, which, however, it cannot grasp with the categories of the understanding, but must experience

through the ethical voice within and through the beautiful and sublime in nature or art. As a boundary experience, the sublime marks the transition from the loss of energy to the gain of energy, from pain to pleasure, from self-questioning to self-reliance, from the finite to the infinite. This double-codedness explains the *ambivalence* immanent in the structure of the sublime, its wavering between disunity and unity, irrationality and rationality, passivity and activity, criticism and metaphysics, or pain and “negative delight” (Kant). This conflictual and paradoxical structure makes the sublime a category of incommensurability, and that is exactly what Lyotard takes it for, leaving out, however, the traditional metaphysical framework that gave it its elevated status.

One would expect that the concept of the beautiful, because of its static, closed nature, has only limited relevance for postmodern writers and critics. But this is not always the case. In postmodern texts, the beautiful can be various things. It may be (symbolic) form, it may be the surface hiding the abyss, and it may be a reduction, a de-vitalization of life. Gass, with his Kantian leanings, makes beauty the hallmark of *all* aesthetic experience. He takes seriously, and leads to the limit, Kant’s idea that beauty lies in the eye of the observer. Not only can sensory experience and art be beautiful, but also can all the highest creations of the human mind, including philosophical systems that are not received as truths but in terms of beauty. Aesthetics turns into the *aesthetic attitude* or mode. Gass himself defined the aesthetic mode: “[y]ou enter these various [philosophical] systems believing they are beautiful” (Ziegler and Bigsby 166). “[T]he object of art is to make more beautiful that which is, and [...] that which is is rarely beautiful, often awkward and ugly and ill-arranged” (Gass *World Within the Word* 1979, 105); and he adds in a discussion with Gardner: “My particular aim is that it [the work] be loved because it is so beautiful in itself, something that exists simply to be experienced. So the beauty has to come first” (LeClair and McCaffery 23). Both statements suggest that the “beautiful” points to the aesthetic quality of the text, the formal structure of the “finished product” (31) because that is what Gass is primarily interested in. The depth-dimension of the beautiful, if it is not reduced to a decorative mode, involves symbolic significance, and it does so in Gass’s own texts. Especially *Omensetter’s Luck* has a highly symbolic quality in the distribution of its themes and its characters.

(The fact that Gass departs from this clear-cut formal structure in *The Tunnel*, in spite of the central symbol named in the title, might explain what critics have called that book's partial failure [see p. ].)

But it is not only Gass who speaks of the beautiful in reference to his texts. Hawkes says in a discussion with Barth: "I want fiction always to situate us in the psychic and literal spot where life is most difficult, most dangerous, most beautiful" (LeClair and McCaffery 14-15), the beautiful being obviously, as with Kant and Gass, a formal category, reminiscent of what he calls "structure", or an intricate pattern, in his case of design and debris, which serves, as with Barth and Gass, as the new criterion of beauty. Hawkes exemplifies in his texts what he means by "beautiful", for instance in the formally balanced, beautiful sex-tableaux in *The Blood Oranges*, the symbolic qualities of which we analyzed above. Barth, naming himself an "orchestrator" (13) and referring to his texts as "passionately formal" (17), as emblems of fiction-making, could have used the term "beautiful". Gass says: "Barth establishes [in "The Night-Sea Journey"] a beautiful tension between the spermatozoon, which say 'No', and the finale, which, like Molly Bloom, says 'Yes!' But, I think, Barth means the *no*, far more than the *yes*" (Ziegler and Bigsby 166). But beauty is also surface, hiding the abyss. Esme in Gaddis's *The Recognitions* writes: "Beauty's nothing but beginning of Terror we're still just able to bear, and why we adore it so is because it serenely disdains to destroy us" (298). Barthelme works with the collage of incongruities: "I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more often the awkward than the beautiful" (LeClair and McCaffery 34).

The beautiful becomes problematic and is evaluated negatively when it is not a formal characteristic of the text, as it is with Gass, but characterizes the world depicted. Wherever in postmodern fiction beauty, harmony, and peace are suggested by a quiet surface, they are unfavorably contrasted with the *life* principles of force, vitality, movement, and struggle. This is true in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* of the extra-terrestrial alternative world of the Tralfamadorians, whose devitalized forms of behavior are fantasized into beautiful but sterile irreality. Similarly, in Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*, the beautiful, as category of social and psychological behavior and balance, is devitalized and leads to a dead end by its exclusion of force, of desire and intensive feeling, of



love and pain, a lack of vitality which turns harmony into entropy. Coover's *Briar Rose* is a recasting and transformation of the Sleeping Beauty story. It makes beauty a decisive motive for the plot, the "heroic endeavor" of the prince to wake up "this beautiful maiden, fast asleep, called Briar Rose" with a "transcendental love" (26, 16). The book plays with the beautiful, its attraction, its build-up of illusions, and its destructive potential. This includes the prince's perception when he is caught in the briars: "Ah, the beautiful: what a deadly illusion! Yet, still he is drawn to it" (26). What characterizes and complicates the use of concepts and terms like the beautiful and the sublime in postmodern fiction is the fact that almost all narrative arguments and patterns are overlaid with irony, parody, or the comic mode and thus attain an ambivalence that would be inconsistent with Kant's understanding of the terms, or at least complicate their use. Though the dominance of the force-factor in postmodern narrative scarcely ever allows the beautiful to manifest itself unmodified, even undeformed, the multiperspective and the balance of form and force may establish a symmetry which can be — in Gass's terms — again formally beautiful, a beautiful harmony. In addition, in a doubly aestheticized form that superimposes, for instance, over the "natural" the "artificial", as in Hawkes's sex tableau in *The Blood Oranges*, the beautiful attains new significance as the creator of a moment of revelation, of synthesis, of possibility which, however, does not last.

More important than the idea of the beautiful (for which, in a sense, modernism has striven in the balance and totality of form) is the concept of the sublime that, because of its contradictory structure already emphasized by Kant, has had an astonishing career with postmodern critics, especially with Lyotard and his eager followers. They have employed the notion of the sublime to illustrate the contrarian function of literature and art in a postmodern age of global information, endless entertainment, and a seemingly "anything goes" attitude that appears to know no limits of presentation. By way of contrast to a culture of "depthlessness", the postmodern sublime is described as that which "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste [...] that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (Lyotard 1984c, 81). Though Lyotard explicitly refers to Kant in his definition, what is missing is

of course the metaphysical frame of reference, which would make the experiencing subject safely rest in the certainty of belief. A whole wave of transferences of Kant's (metaphysical) sublime to human civilization has followed. Nevertheless, whatever is experienced in contemporary culture as sublime only reveals a "*human sublime*".<sup>145</sup>

It is obvious that the centered, unique sublime of the romantic/ modern tradition, and its "ideology of the sublime" (Weiskel 6), provided by the representation of landscape and its infinite space, has been turned into "a moribund aesthetic" (6), and that the function of art of providing a sublime, blissful experience, both in the modern sublime moment of "revelation" or "being" (the character) and the experience of the metaphysics of form (the reader), has been severely impeded if not abandoned. The postmodern critic may come to the conclusion that what is left are only *neo-sublimities* or even *mock-sublimities*. These, however, testify, even if ironically, as is the case with the simulacra of history, to the human need for a sentiment of wonder and the marvelous, for a transcendent perspective that "defines the self as interior infinitude" and affords "the mind an egress from the world of [outer] force, from the violence of matter", and opens it to "an intuition of indeterminate boundlessness [...] though not necessarily to affirm what had been imagined as 'God'" (Rob Wilson 61, 200-201).<sup>146</sup>

This wish to afford "the mind an egress from the world of force" (in our terms, power and restriction) by means of the "indeterminate boundlessness" of the imagination is the basis of postmodern American fiction, its unlimited *energy* of expansion and reduction, its ability to fuse opposites, to provide "unity" in *multiplicity*, in *simultaneity*, in the congruity of the *incongruous*, the *paradox*, and in *play*, *irony*, and the *comic* mode. This unity in multiplicity includes *doubt* and the paradoxical contradictions that the sublime exhibits, with or without religious framework. Though Gass confesses in the interview mentioned: "I'm a Kantian, I'm afraid" (Ziegler and Bigsby 162), and, elaborating on Kant's effort, is ultimately intent on establishing harmony between the categories of imagination, understanding and the ideas and ideals of reason, he still cannot exclude doubts about the possibility of success:

Finally, the ground of the imagination in Kant rests upon the very possibility of order. I agree with Kant, but I'm not so sure it can be done. So I'm interested in the tension, in the almost successful, possibly failing,

*attempt.* Is the imagination, in a sense, based upon unification, or is it in a certain fundamental way disruptive? Is there a real harmony possible or is there not? (154-55)

Speaking of the sublime in terms of a self-enclosed and self-referential world of words, Gass remarks: “we [...] float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come, and there, in peace, patiently to dream of the sensuous, imagined, and mindful Sublime” (*OBB* 58). The synthesis of the sublime is a dream. As Gass notes — and as the other postmodern writers would agree — the creative energy arises not so much from the possibility of syntheses but from the *tension* between the formal synthesis of consciousness and the disruptive force of the imagination. (In fact, this tension that Gass speaks of and utters in the form of questions is the reason that the *question* as aesthetic form, starting with Beckett, becomes so prominent in postmodern fiction.) The postmodern imagination in its ranging from image-creating to pattern-producing and void-filling is not so much a productive and connecting link between the chaos of sense-impressions and the categories of understanding in Kant’s sense, nor is it a revelator of design and pattern in the particular object, as in Kant’s aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, but rather it is the arbitrary producer of constructions and deconstructions. As such, the activity of the imagination has something to do, though in quite different framings, with the Kantian ideas of the infinite and of freedom and of the a priori status of the imagination that makes it possible to liberate consciousness from the actual, the fixed, or the ideological.<sup>147</sup>

The polarity of the imagination, its deconstructive and reconstructive force, can be seen in a larger context. One problem to face is that “*imagination is phenomenologically self-sufficient but epistemologically non-self-sufficient*” (Casey 172). Another lies in the fact that the autonomy of the imagination is neither legislative, moral, nor otherwise, not even self-legislative; its enactments are not binding, and yet the depiction of human beings and their world in a kind of totality of possibility includes moral thinking and moral acts, acts of “legislation” and binding responsibility at least as possibility. In this lack of authority, in a moral sense, lies the source of the final paradox of the imaginative activity and its constructs in art and literature. On the one hand, the work of art and literature has only a secondary autonomy, while, on the other, it is “the most multi-locular

of mental acts” (Casey 182); it in fact touches and imbues the other, epistemologically or morally directed activities of the mind. But the autonomy of imagination, which might be described as “imaginative indifference” (189) is a “thin” autonomy since it is disconnected from the lifeworld and has no fundamental basis of its own as a synthesizing faculty of the mind. The activities of the imagination can easily be put in doubt because, even if they play their “free” games, they are still connected to this lifeworld. The lifeworld is the precondition of the imagination’s existence in as much as its productions are always analogues of the world, though the imagination is free from the pressing concern of “reality”, which it nevertheless reflects in its own insubstantiality. The problem is how to make the purely imaginative construct of art and literature epistemologically and ethically valuable in its aesthetic self-certainty and self-determinacy, its epistemological and ethical indeterminacy and pure possibility, its affirmative autonomy, and its variability and multiplicity, and thus how to constitute it as a meaningful analogue of the world. The imagination needs the stabilizing impulse of rational examination. This need enhances the role of *reflection*, which through its structure, and not necessarily through its results, provides stability.

An enhanced role of reflection, however, also makes for conflict. Through its image-making, form-giving, and unity-producing function, the imagination has become all-encompassing; it tends to absorb the functions of the other powers of the mind like sensuous representation, (rational) understanding, and reflection by making them mobile and “nomadic” as well, infusing into their forms the force of disruption. They all adopt traits of the imaginary and the fantastic, yet not without strife and struggle. Just as perception and reflection take on (disruptive) traits of the imagination, the imagination and its creations are measured, controlled, and complained about by reflection. Reflection as *process*, as process of thinking glides through time and promotes possibility-narration, the imaginative force of constructing worlds, the modalities of play, irony, and the comic; however, as self-interrogation, as summary and resultative thought, it introduces ideas like reality, adequacy, relevance, or identity-center (see Derrida, Lacan, etc.), terms which are always “waiting” to appear as correctives, even if they appear only “under erasure”. As we saw in the discussion of reflection and

its relation to emotion, desire, and belief, the situation that arises out of these contrasting circumstances is highly ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, the imagination takes over the role of the dominant power and adapts all the other faculties of the mind to its own workings; on the other hand, however, feeling, desire, belief, reflection, though they have lost a unifying center, float in and out of the imaginary's games in the continuous present, providing irritation because they *cannot* be fully integrated into the modality of the possible and the temporal mode of the present. Their intentionality is not defined by spontaneity, but by recollection and anticipation.

## **9. The Perspectives of Negation: The Satiric, the Grotesque, the Monstrous, Farce and their Attenuation by Play, Irony, and the Comic Mode**

We will conclude the book with a brief discussion of the perspectives of incongruity and negation, satire, the grotesque, the monstrous, farce, and their attenuation by parody, play, irony, and the comic mode. These modes of fiction need a more extensive analysis against the background of their own history. There is no space here for such a comprehensive treatment, which will be furnished in another book.

Postmodern fiction is a self-reflexive art-form, with a keen suspicion of the referential function of language, and therefore without any stable relationship to the external reality or to previously accepted codes of production. Literary standards and rules are exposed as the conventional and artificial, frequently clichéd formulas they are; our normal expectations of temporal and thematic progression and univocal meaning are suspended and shown up in their artifice. Self-reflexivity has its own narrative perspectives. Our study has emphasized the narrative attitudes that correspond to the self-consciousness of the novel and to the doubts of author, narrator, or character about the world and their own art. They are the critical stances that arise out of sheer incongruity and lay bare the deficits of society in morals, standards, and beliefs, in knowledge and understanding. We will here emphasize the postmodern use of these perspectives of incongruity and deconstruction, and their interaction.

It may suffice to note at this point that all the perspectives mentioned have a more or less independent status as conceptualizations of both *attitudes* and *modes of writing*. As such they have the advantage of designating both general human viewpoints and literary categories. By relating the different stances of evaluation with one another in a *chain of categories*, the scheme of perspectives provides for transitions and overlaps and thus becomes more flexible. Though the satiric, the grotesque, the parodic, and the comic modes are understood as models of understanding with

inherent structures of their own, with different profiles of contradiction and negativity, they all depend on a basis of *incongruity* and have a similar *dualistic* structure. *Satire* thus aims at criticism of social deformation from a safe value-point; the *grotesque* grows out of satire when no value-horizon any longer fits that which is being done; it denotes the inexplicable deformation of humans by humans; *farce* may render the grotesque “lightly”; “the *monstrous* is an outgrowth of the grotesque, denotes the ineffable extremity of evil. The common base makes their interaction possible and attractive, while the more or less sharp edge provides for variability and change. The attitudes of play, irony, and the comic mode are means of attenuating the stricter modes of negation, satire, the grotesque, and the monstrous. They prepare the ground for a multiplication and superimposition of attitudes and viewpoints and the resulting complexities of the postmodern text.

Traditional definitions of *satire* often lump the comic and the satiric together into one category, naming as targets of satire the duality of Folly and Vice: “individual and collective villainy, cowardice and hypocrisy” (A. Clark 36), “vice and folly” (37), “hypocrisy, vanity and folly” (Feinberg 38), “folly and vulgarity” (Kernan 1959, 14), “idiocy and viciousness” (Kernan 1971, 4), “folly and evil” (Quintana 261), “falsehood” (Sutherland 11). The combination of folly and vice as target areas tends to subsume the comic view under the satiric one, as was common after the Renaissance and up to the eighteenth century, or to subordinate the satiric to the comic, as nineteenth-century theorists, Meredith and Bergson for instance, frequently did (Bergson, “Laughter”). Furthermore, satire may be seen as subservient to humor, the latter being conceived of as a humanizing and aestheticizing perspective, which might keep satire from becoming mere invective and give it aesthetic form; or satire may appear as an intellectual literary form running counter to the emotionally synthesizing effect of humor, while maintaining, nevertheless, the ability to include humor by blunting its own denunciatory edge. Finally, satire may be eliminated altogether as a literary category, a possibility that Horace had prophetically suggested and that Hegel in fact had proposed, because its critical stance allegedly is too aggressively subjective or too directly related to reality and because its supposedly one-dimensional didacticism runs counter to the growing complexity of literary forms

since the Renaissance (Hegel 1975, 516). There is obviously a demand for definitions that allow each of the mentioned perspectives its own profile and function. The following modal distinctions do not start out from genre theories but from *attitudes*.<sup>148</sup>

Satire is “a Protean term” (Elliott, “Satire” 1979, 268). It is one of the oldest concepts of both *genre* and *perspective*. Philosophy and literary theories since Aristotle have described and analyzed genres, especially tragedy and comedy, and have placed satire (in the Greek sense of satyr play) as mediator between the two (Horace). This understanding of satire (satyr) is reflected also in the other, Roman meaning of satire: a mixed poem not necessarily polemic but conglomerate in structure. From the genre a typology of “styles” has been abstracted: tragedy - high style; satire - medium style; comedy - low style. The genre of satire developed from Greek and Roman times (in the subgenres of Lucilian and Menippean satire) to the verse satires, character , and periodical essays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England. Already in Roman times, the quality of “the satiric” was abstracted from the genre of satire. It indicated a dominantly polemic and mocking *attitude* and *literary mode* that had a socializing, didactic purpose in the depiction and indictment of “wrong”, norm-violating behavior. Out of this concept grew the modern understanding of satire as an “écriture” (Barthes), a mode of writing that can generate its own genre, as in verse satire, or be combined with, or superimposed on, other modes of writing, as in narrative.

Postmodern deconstructive theory has emphasized the ambivalence of the satiric mode. In this, the analysis of satire reflects the general challenge of traditional categories since the sixties, the dismissal of the modern, unifying formal design in art, the doubt in the referentiality of language and the abandonment of clear-cut borderlines between reality and fiction, and the substitution for the concept of author, the notion of intertextuality. Values are seen to be ideological, either-or opposites are dissolved, the boundaries between good and bad defused, the “other” respected. Interdisciplinary cultural studies lead to a multiplicity of viewpoints in the study of satire, including socioeconomic and anthropological aspects. New analyses move satire “somewhat away from moral centrality” (Morton, “Introduction” 2) and emphasize the complexity and



ambiguity of the important satiric texts in the history of literature and in their historic specificity.

Though one has to take into account the comprehensive range of satire, it seems advisable to the traditional understanding of satire as a highly critical and moral stance with a code of value judgments, a bipolar structure, the contrasting of "Moral Virtue" and "Vice or Folly", a definition to which Dryden, Schiller, Schlegel, Meredith, Bergson and countless others since antique times have held. It establishes a dialectic frame of reference between deficiency and value, reality and ideal, criticized and criticizer, optimism and pessimism. This view is supported by Mary Claire Randolph's analysis of formal verse satire (i.e., the form of satire as a genre), which she sees as characterized by a design that depends on the straight opposition of extreme vice and extreme virtue, thus underlining the moral character of satire ("Structural Design"). The advantage of starting out with such a "full" model of satire is that variations of, and deviations from, the standard form are more easily visible and describable.

The comprehensiveness and the transformability of the satiric perspective guarantee the variability of the poles of both deformation and value. The target area in the deformation pole, its kind and range, differ. The criticism may concern specific groups of misguided individuals, larger segments of society, or society *in toto*; it may assign responsibility to the people or to deforming social circumstances. The kind and rigor of the values set against social deformations change; they depend on the moral ideal and on the degree and nature of the disharmony expressed, on the severity of misdemeanor, the scope of vice and evil. Satirical criticism may be more or less radical; it may view improvement as probable or not so probable. The critical voice may accordingly be more or less isolated, and the criticized person or group of persons may be able to disregard the criticism or be put on the defensive. In its outcome, satiric criticism offers two fundamentally different resolutions: either harmony is (re)established at the end, or it is not. In the latter case, an abyss of deformation and disorientation breaks open and remains without synthesis. This radicalizes the perspective of negation and opens satire for the grotesque. Finally both the deformation and the value poles may be altered, in fact exchanged. In the dialectic of right and wrong, the pole of rightness may be occupied either by the

system with its clear-cut concepts and traditions of what is right and wrong, or it may be occupied by doubt in the system, the rejection of its strict forms, its rationality, of its simple cause and effect scheme and plain ideology, its reified values and stifling closure, against which are set the forces of vitality and life, the values of openness and flexibility, the belief in the as-well-as instead of the either-or. This is the point at which where the fantastic mode, the rambling variety, the playful spirit, the arbitrary form that the postmodern theory emphasizes as characteristic features of satire come into their own and represent the dominance of force over (reified) form. If, however, force is pure deconstruction without reconstruction in a new form, for instance as principle of vitalizing energy, this is the end of the satiric stance which needs a (positive) value pole for its judgment of the social world. Finally, depending on the topical or more general nature of satire and its targets, one can speak of “social” and “cosmic” satire.<sup>149</sup> The latter bears witness to the modern penchant for the universal (truth). Satire and especially the grotesque, placed at the end of the road of negation, open, as it were, space for a kind of mystery factor, the wonder and confusion at the power of human violence, social corruption, and plain evil, given the fact that the human being by its own claim is rational and bound to a moral sense. In the postmodern experimental novel, satire hardly ever stands alone. It is part of a strategy that overlaps perspectives. The result is a denial of relations of dominance.

Like satire, the *grotesque* has been widely defined in mutually exclusive terms. The grotesque has been identified with the burlesque, i.e., a lower subform of the comic; it is another term for parody, and becomes the formal component of satire, the latter creating “grotesque images of society”. The “satiric grotesque”, contrasted to the “fantastic grotesque” (Kayser), turns into a special kind of satire. Then the grotesque is identified with the absurd; in the analysis of Beckett’s texts, the two terms are often used synonymously. Or the grotesque emancipates itself from both satire and the absurd as a perspective of radical social deformation and individual disorientation without binding values. But then again “the contemporary usage [of the grotesque] is so loose that the word is in danger of losing all meaning and passing out of critical discourse altogether” (Harpham xx). What the study of “aesthetic problems and methodologies” has assigned to the category of the grotesque is “a

dizzying variety of possibilities: the decadent, the baroque, the metaphysical, the absurd, the surreal, the primitive; irony, satire, caricature, parody; the Feast of Fools, Carnival, the Dance of Death — all tributary ideas funneling into a center at once infinitely accessible and infinitely obscure” (xvii). Such a mix of aspects does not make for clarity. It characterizes not only the grotesque but also the other categories of incongruity and negation. Yet though the awareness of problems of definition may have been heightened by the postmodern condition of uncertainty, the grotesque, like all other categories mentioned, still needs a specific profile, if it is to be useful for the analysis of texts. This is true in spite of the fact that the grotesque, as a category of extremity, of extreme deformation, disorientation, and distortion, of violence and paranoia, is more complex than other categories and therefore subject to wider variations of meaning. This is why a kind of mystery factor enters this mode of negation. Since the grotesque is linked to a sense of inexplicable evil, its definition bears traits of the mysterious, the ineffable, even the unnamable. Uncertainty of motives, uncalled-for brutality, and terrifying violence put the grotesque at the limit of behavior and perception, outside the ordinary. Yet though it transcends the ordinary, the rationality of motives and common humanity, it is still measured against them; and since under the terms of multiperspective it cannot gain dominance alone, qualifications are called for, and mutations and transitions have to be taken into account, transfers into other ways of looking at things, into less extreme perspectives, satire, for instance, or even the comic mode. The placing of the grotesque within such a chain of interrelated categories creates relations, and relations interpret the noninterpretable.

In discussing the modernist and postmodernist grotesque, it has been helpful to follow Kayser’s line of argument, emphasizing the negativity of the grotesque. As Harpham remarks, “[w]e should not contribute to its [the grotesque’s] elusiveness by pretending that it exists in some positive form. It is [...] a ‘species of confusion’” (*Grotesque* xxi). For clarity’s sake we will, however, add a number of specifications that refer to the potential differences in the focus of the grotesque perspective. Taking up the features that most critics attribute to the grotesque, its social focus and its radical negativity, we will here define the grotesque as a social category and a

radicalization of the satiric view, a category that points out and indicts the utter *deformation of humans by humans*; it is a more comprehensive or “synthetic” category than the satiric and the (traditional) comic stances, the incongruencies of which it combines, absorbs, and revalues. The grotesque is more complex and more synthetic than satire because it contains two pairs of contradictions, which again oppose one another and yet are fused in a strange way. The first (logical) contradiction — that rational human beings are irrational — is the basis of the ridiculous, of “deformed” and deforming laughter; the second (ethical) contradiction — that human beings are inhumane — is the basis of terror and horror. The grotesque therefore contains both a logical and an ethical contradiction. It is a totalizing perspective. It radicalizes negation to the point where neither the belief in the present nor an utopian hope for the future remain viable. The human being appears as the mere object of human whim; he or she is distorted and disoriented by the loss of moral equilibrium and freedom. But by manifesting the ethic contradiction that humans are inhumane, the text still holds up a moral viewpoint, and, as Kayser notes, it also nourishes the hope of every artistic endeavor.

The radicalization of the grotesque can be called the *monstrous*. It enters the text, when violence and deformation reflect “normality”, when no social or metaphysical originator of the deformation is inferred and no moral view indicated, not even as an utopian vision. The monstrous is here understood as the “neutralization” and impassibility of the grotesque deformation of humans by humans. The monstrous, in contrast to the grotesque, has no counterpoint and is indifferent to humane values, to care and compassion, responsibility and distinctions like victim and victimizer. It marks the quite “other”, the non-categorizable, and radicalizes the enigmatic aspect that is part of the grotesque and its inhumaneness. The monstrous just happens as “*event*” without sufficient explanation or motivation, logic or reason. It is experienced as something from outside, as “fate” that leaves no privileged (moral) position (as the grotesque does) to view and judge it, it in fact remains outside human reckoning and understanding. Examples are Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* or Hawkes’s *The Cannibal*.

Yet the more the grotesque worldview determines fiction and creates “[c]laustrophobia, violence and crooked sight” (Malin, *Flannery O’Connor* 115) as its structure, the more the irrational powers from within and without assume the roles of character and action. The more the grotesque becomes exclusive and loses a moral counterpoint, even the idea of a realizable value, not to speak of an ideal, the more its irrational aspects come to the fore, the *logical*, not only ethical, contradiction in the grotesque — that rational humans are *irrational*. The extremity of deformation, distortion, and violence then tip over and attain traits of the comic, the ridiculous, which are, as argued above, part of the grotesque anyway. Already Schopenhauer and Dostoevsky spoke of the distorting human tendencies in terms of the comic. The latter’s *Underground Man* notes: “Man loves to create [...] But why [...] does he also passionately love destruction and chaos?” He gives an answer that already points to the interaction of the chaotic/grotesque and the comic: “He is fond of striving toward achievement, but not so very fond of achievement itself, and this is, naturally, terribly funny. In short, man is constructed comically; there is evidently some joke in all of this” (Dostoevsky 37-38). Thomas Mann sees in the grotesque a new mode that arises out of the combination of the tragic and comic: “For I feel that, broadly and essentially, the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style” (*Past Masters* 240-41); he adds on another occasion that the grotesque was “properly something more than the truth, something real in the extreme, not something arbitrary, false, absurd, and contrary to reality” (qtd. in Reed 35), thus emphasizing the aspect of the “real” that is almost always stressed by the theorists of the grotesque. The accentuation of the comic aspect will open the grotesque mode to new ways of operation in postmodern fiction.

The combination of violence and the comic mode is *farce*. It comicalizes violence. Violence again is bifocal, at least in the twentieth century. It can signal the deformation of civil society, or it may stand for unchecked vitality and dynamism of life. Countering the reification of human civilization, the theatre of the Absurd and the theatre of Cruelty (of Arrabal and Artaud) no longer adopt the humanistic ideals of high thought, responsible behavior, and social

harmony as standards of evaluation and regeneration, but make the antagonistic *force*, Life and life's *energy*, their self-evident values. The targets of indictment are no longer violence and social or individual deformation, a world standing on its head, but rather reason, order, and the routine of social life; the lack of balance, the split of the self, and the determinate disorder and chaos, in short, the anti-world of absolute incongruity, become the means of regeneration. This anti-civilizational attitude relieves the individual of the stifling, overpowering strain of the civilizational machinery, the pressure of the established institutions, conventions, ceremonies, official norms, the hierarchies of church, state, and cultural values. In fact, this kind of grotesque that affirms incoherent energy, exuberant abundance, and even violence, while it repudiates order and morals, signifies what Harpham, using Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory as a frame of reference (and accentuating mythic knowledge as an alternative to rational cognition), calls a paradigm change. Just as satire finally turns against the mendacity of society and its values, supporting that which has been so far denied validity, i.e., the body, unbridled psychic and emotional forces, vitality, energy, and change, so grotesque violence, rebelling against the moral center of culture, is meant to destroy the exhausted and clichéd views, conventions, and values cherished as order by society and in the process becomes farce. Heller's *Catch 22* is a pertinent example for the blends of the perspectives of negation.

*Play* is here the "free play" (Kant, Derrida) of the mind upon things, conventions, and structures; it dissolves the idea of a structural unity of the "work" in favor of a process-oriented view of the "text", a recognition of a multiplicity, a network of discourses, which, by playing with and against one another, construct and deconstruct the text. Play liberates postmodern fiction from traditional constraints. Yet play is a very elusive and ambiguous term to define. The spontaneity, naïvety, and creativity of play, its elementary unquestionableness as well as the mixture of reality and irreality in it seem to resist analysis. Play is a motion in space, an occurrence in time, a process of thinking and feeling, and an idea of the mind. Play has become an important notion in both philosophy and literature because it contains in itself — as a phenomenon, an idea, a linguistic term — ambivalence, multi-dimensionality, and indefiniteness. It refutes the old, in Nietzsche's view destructive

Western tradition of dualistic thinking by “loosening up” dualities and their borderlines. The interpretations of play range widely; they depend on the conceptual framework play is placed in. (1) Play is seen to be subject-oriented; it is the attitude of the experiencing subject. For Friedrich Schiller or Johan Huizinga, play integrates the self. Schiller sees art as the highest form of play, the play of the imagination as the highest use of human faculties. With the decenterment of the subject in postmodern fiction, this idea of play has become obsolete. (2) Nietzsche and Heidegger take play out of the human-centered context and speak of “world play”. For Nietzsche, play grants the exuberance of a higher freedom that affirms life and its multiplicity; it sets the plurality of manifestations against the reductive Western views that foreground a center, a metaphysical essence, the order of rationality. (3) Wittgenstein refers play to language and speaks of language games that can be multiplied infinitely and that are dependent on the individual.

(4) The postmodern concept frees play from the idea of a subject. Derrida radicalizes the idea of play into what he calls “free play”. He views play as a value-neutral, largely self-serving process, a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. “Free” or “unbound” play presents itself in Nietzsche’s sense as “the cheerful affirmation of the game of a world which is determined by a noncenter more than by a loss of the center” (1976, 441). In free play, contrary to instrumental play, i.e., play that serves a purpose, the oppositions subject-object and winner-loser have become meaningless. In terms of Derrida’s language-theory, play in the text opens “a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions” (“Structure”, 118-19). The play of “différance” inscribes an “infinite deferment of the signified” (Barthes 1977, 158). Free play decenters and is itself decentered, is no longer, as it was for Schiller, a factor in the integrating process of the self. This is the precondition for the activation of play as radical deconstructive/reconstructive energy in postmodern fiction. The postmodern ambiguous attitude towards the concept of character in fiction is one of the reasons to regard play, independent of character and subject, as a self-serving process, as “text play” (see Iser 1993, 247- 81). This text play has two characteristics: first, it is a mode of creation, of domination over the

material that is played with, and, second, in spite of its dominance over the material, play has no structure of its own, except that it is movement back and forth. Gadamer writes: "In each case what is intended is the to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end [...] it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement" (103). But the play of fiction cannot exclude that which oversteps and transcends it, the existential dimension and the depth-view beyond the surface of play. Derrida finally emphasizes that the codes of realism and centrality are such that even when they are deconstructed by the textual matrix, they still persist, transforming language into a centered world. He notes that the "irrepressible desire for such a [transcendental] signified" leads to "the desire to restrict play; this desire is irresistible" (1978, 297). As a consequence, play with language and worlds does not extinguish existential anxiety; on the contrary, it creates exactly that which it appears to overstep, to cover, and to evade: the sense of the void and of nothingness and the need for a center, a structuring form, in addition to the play and the game. Play can become self-reflexive and, as it were, play with play and with the concept of play itself (Barthelme), to the point of suspending play. The dialectic of play and void, the force of the back-and-forth movement of play, and the restrictions of form and center direct almost all of postmodern fiction, except the most extreme experiments. The flexibility of play prepares the way for irony and the comic mode.

*Irony* is a difficult term, too; it includes irony as attitude, method, and form. It thrives on disengagement, distance, and relativity; it is a distancing, contemplative, or rather reflexive attitude, and it is determined by negativity, by the active, derogatory cognition of disparity. But though irony is certain as to what is being negated, it is uncertain as to what should take its place. It is a relational strategy, operating between in-between perceptions, between meanings that are flux. Behind it there is an attitude of openness directed towards the deconstruction pole of the new radicalized possibility-thinking. According to Friedrich Schlegel, there are two ironies, the irony of subject matter and the irony of form. While the irony of subject matter is based on the attitude of the subject, the irony of form is the result of narrative strategies, a



figuration in the text. The New Critics define the modern formal irony as the resolution of a maximum of tensions, as “complexity” and “ambiguity” within a totalizing form. The negativity of irony is “completed”, the opposition of impulses contained by the positivity of self-reliant and self-confident aesthetic form. In the postmodern view, the conflict between the two poles — disjunction and unity — is not solved by the modern strategy of ironic form. Seen from this perspective, faith in the saving primacy of form takes on the character of illusion, of evasion and failure. The strain and tenseness in the modern aesthetic form — i.e., the ironic break of form, and the unresolvability of paradox — often enough seem to outweigh the unifying effect. They open consciousness and the text to the underlying but repressed chaos, to the looming, uncontainable nothingness.

The recognition of the modernist literary failure to create stability by aesthetic form and to use form as a shield against the fluidity and complexity of life has three consequences: first, the recognition and acceptance of the ironic condition of mankind; and, second, as a result of this perception, the ironic attitude of the artist, narrator, character who, as it were, in compensation for all that perishes become enraptured with the infinity of possibility; and, third, the balancing out of chaos and order, or even the challenge of order by disorder that overwhelms order in postmodern fictional form, which is in fact an irony of discourses. Every position shifts the ironic ambiguity and complexity from the text’s “spatial” structure to the elemental, ever-changing movement in time, the ironic flow of disruptive, unresolved energy and desire, so that one can speak, instead of an irony of form, of a “free” irony of force, representing in the text the (radical) irony of attitude. Alan Wilde speaks here of “suspensive irony” (1981, 10, 127-31). The postmodern ironic process of endless construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, like the modern ironic form, is again double-poled; it has an ironic structure of its own, because, as both Federman and Sukenick note of their own texts, the creative process of textual constitution and de-constitution, especially in the radical cases, of which we will speak shortly, on the one hand appears to be independent, to control and direct itself “automatically” in its progress; on the other hand, however, it makes the subject that abandons itself to the text come to itself. Contrary to the modern text, it is no longer discernible which is

the negative and which the positive aspect, force or form. It is a question of interpretation; each can be both, negative or positive.

*Parody* ironizes and defuses the finiteness of form, also moral form, opening borderlines, freeing reified concepts. As tool of deconstructive force, it negates and transforms the falsifying, reified stability of form into mobility, while satire negates the content of unvalues, of vices, of attitudes of immobility. Parody can be defined with Margaret A. Rose as “the critical refunctioning of performed literary material with comic effect” (35). One can distinguish, as several critics have done, according to the target, a specific and a more general kind of parody. Parody can be specific in that it refers to one individual or well-known text and ridicules it; or it can be increasingly general by referring not only to one single text but a genre or to literary themes, structures, modes of clichéd language. It is obvious that the more important parody becomes for a literary epoch, the more general it turns out to be — and the more evident is its generative power to create something productively new. In fact, parody has a double dialectic structure. First, there is the opposition between the target, the dead conventions, and the value pole, the vitality and energy of the fresh and unspent, used for the devaluation of the target (in the course of which the relation between the two, however, can become ambivalent). On this contrast between the old and the new builds another dialectic. This second dialectic, in its attack on an exhausted literary mode, builds up the contrast between the past and the present, the old and the new. On the one hand it devalues the old and exhausted; on the other, it emphasizes the ability to reformat old materials and styles for a new beginning. There is thus a certain latitude for accentuating various aspects of parody: either imitation and devaluation or stylization, and transformation can be accentuated, on a scale that allows for an infinite number of combinations and crossings of dividing lines (see Brooke-Rose 1985). Postmodern fiction of course emphasizes stylization and transformation over imitation and devaluation of narrative conventions; it cherishes the new designs of the text that parody generates (see Barth 1984). Since the accentuation of stylization and transformation in parody presupposes that the procedure becomes transparent, the “clash” between the two discourses in this kind of regenerating parody is often combined with self-reflexivity.

The precondition for the easy alliance of satire and parody is a social process that has worn out not only values but also the language of values, including the by-now stereotyped artistic gestures of protest that have become mere rhetoric, part of a self-serving cultural performance. The language of all criticism, its jargon of social analysis and judgment, is cast into question. Ultimately revealed is not only the hypocrisy of the seemingly virtuous language of criticism, which is allegedly directed against corrupt action and consciousness in bourgeois society, but also the more fundamental deficiency: the radical discrepancy between a language available now only as cliché and a reality neither graspable in terms of values nor comprehensible and describable in language. When one recognizes and criticizes the emptiness of the social world and at the same time is aware of the world-language problem, the sense of language-being-the-world, satire and parody fuse. Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Elkin, Gass, Sorrentino, and others parody the stereotyped jargons of psychology, sociology, aesthetics, cultural criticism, existentialism, the language of alienation, and the tools of narration, all of which they consider to be degenerated into ritualized formulas that can be placed and played with in any context.

The structure of parody is analogous to that of the comic mode, which in its open form also sets the vital and natural against the fixed and the mechanical — the difference being, however, that the comic mode, even if it uses language-effects and targets clichés of expression, always realizes itself in, and is bound to, the narrated situation because only the concrete is comprehensible as comic. This is not necessarily the case for parody. While parody lightens the earnest “heaviness” of satire by transferring criticism from content to form, it prepares the ground for the comic mode, which in postmodern fiction, as we will argue shortly, is generalized to the extent that it reaches beyond the comic polarity of norm-obedience and norm-violation. If the comic mode spreads to include the entire narrative composition, the comic becomes an important stimulus for parody, just as parody turns out to be an important ally of the comic. The conviction that there is no difference between reality and fiction, that all we have is language and its fictitious constructs, leads to the fusion of the comic and the parodic. The comic mode uses language-effects and clichés of thought and feeling in a situational concretization, even “dramatization”, as in Barthelme’s “A Shower

of Gold”, with its combination of disparities and modes of evaluation (comic situation and character, parody of existentialist jargon, satiric view of society and culture), while, on the other hand, the parodic mode ironizes the clichéd conventions of theory and narrative. The cliché becomes the meeting ground for the free comic and the free parodic modes, with the comic mode, because of its narrative nature, in the lead. Parody performs in postmodern fiction the role of a mediator between satire and the comic view. Disrupting the traditional hierarchy of values, it supports the creation of free space for representing or creating the non-rationalizable, the non-familiarizable, in short, the “other”.

The postmodern *comic mode* is different from the traditional concepts of the comic, which, since Aristotle, have been defined in terms of the opposition between the individual and society and its norms; the comic character appears in the traditional mode as a representative of foolishness in the narrower sense, i.e., of a relatively harmless, only unreasonable, merely self-damaging, and correctable phenomenon. The comic mode traditionally has primarily to do with a logical opposition because the established or new order is ultimately more rational or natural, and because the individual who departs from this order only acts unreasonably and not really evilly. Thus the character who acts foolishly (or the reader) only needs to be convinced of the irrationality and illogicality of his or her actions. The author (or narrator) who represents the values of society can afford to be tolerant and in the end can again incorporate the comic character into the universally rational or natural order of things. In the twentieth century, aesthetic theory develops a more expansive view of the comic perspective. According to Joachim Ritter, the conventionally important and traditionally valid is no longer reaffirmed in the comic, but, on the contrary, the small and unimportant, the unconventional, the despised, and laughable take their revenge against the hierarchy of values. The comic is in fact concerned with “establishing the identity of an opponent and outcast with the outcaster” (“Über das Lachen” 73; see also Plessner 121-22). Indeed, “what is comic and makes us laugh is what makes the non-valid visible in what is officially valid and the valid visible in what is officially non-valid” (Marquard 141). In this “second” kind of the comic mode, of which Barth, Elkin, Reed, and others furnish examples, a hierarchy of norms is not established; it is in fact

rejected. Instead, the comic perspective, being made a universal instrument of interference, demands the expansion of the rational norms and viewpoints to the inclusion of what is conventionally non-valid or not so valid. This cancellation of the value differences between outcast and outcaster, however, still assigns a clear cognitive and ethic value to the comic mode. The resulting paradoxical situation is that the leveling or broadening of the norm is a new norm that is actually not a norm at all. The leveling of standards and the expansion of the norm in this second view of the comic mode prepares for a third version of the comic, one that is all-comprehensive and of greatest importance to postmodern fiction.

In this third phase, aesthetic theory has re-interpreted the concept of the comic in terms that are no longer of ethical or cognitive value in a narrower moral or epistemological sense but rather purely aesthetic and “ontological”. The comic polarity norm-obedience and norm-violation is ultimately defused by its formalization or aestheticization. In this purely aesthetic conception of the comic, the comic conflict is reduced to a “collision of reality concepts” (Blumenberg 11), or better, the comic is the result, in the language of communication theory, of the “thematized simultaneity of differing worlds in the communication situation” (Schmidt 1976, 187). One can view this kind of comic mode with Henrich as “free” comic perspective (“*Freie Komik*”). It is free because it acknowledges no epistemological boundaries, no language formulas, no social standards, and no narrative traditions. It constitutes something that has to do with “cross-overs between contexts”(Henrich 385) or what Iser calls “flip-overs” (“*Kipp-Phänomen*” 1976). The effect of this comic mode (and its linkage with free play, free suspensive irony, and free parody) is increased in intensity and force and, associated with that, a stimulation of the imagination.

According to Rainer Warning, the comic mode (he speaks of comedy, a term avoided in our context since it indicates a literary structure, not an attitude) may be taken as the “positivization of negativity” (“*Komik and Komödie als Positivierung von Negativität*”), which is here understood, continuing Warning’s argument, as the unburdening or, rather, the self-distancing from the pressure of norms, demands, rules, and from domination by satire, the grotesque, the absurd, the monstrous, the tragic, but also, one might add, from

the non-commitment of play and the negativity of irony. The free comic view is positive because it accepts the state of affairs and — paradoxically — tries to control it at the same time. The comic perspective both uses (accepts) and deconstructs the traditional negative (existential) attitudes. It dissolves satire and decenters Camus's absurd consciousness, which rebels against the empty universe, and it transforms threatening entropy into neg-entropy by an infusion of the force of mind. It is free montage and collage of independent contexts of pure possibility; the result is the experimental simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. Even violence can be transformed and rendered coolly and clinically, without emotion, as though it were a harmless, non-significant affair. The comic imagination opens and re-vitalizes the (closed) system of the merely given and of traditional thought, of oppositions like good-bad and true-false that in themselves appear to produce entropy.

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## 10. The Novel After Postmodernism

### 10.1. Postmodernism and After

— The declining reputation and influence of the theories and artistic forms of postmodernism in the eighties and nineties of the last century and the beginning of a new transient era did not signify a full break with postmodern art and culture, but it did suggest a new orientation in culture and art following political and social changes. These adjustments, the longer temporal distance from the high points of postmodernism, and a certain exhaustion of the postmodern axioms also changed the critical climate. Critics began to vary their attitude towards the ideological radicalism of postmodernism, its deconstructive stance and epistemological skepticism, its attacks on traditional concepts, values, and customs, and the deconstruction of centers, forms, and boundaries of thought and feeling. Critics took a more sober approach, became detached, vaguer in response or indifferent, distant enough to see the limitations of postmodernism and make them the target of reconsideration or even aggression. A process of reevaluation occurred that could take different directions. Either the term and the concept of postmodernism were more or less discarded and assigned to a past that appeared to have become self-defeating and irrelevant in its theories and artistic practices; or the concept of postmodernism was widened beyond the ideological strictures in which it was formerly defined. In the latter case there again emerged two different approaches. Either the list of postmodern authors in the various fields of the humanities and the arts was broadened in an attempt to avoid strict limitations (Bertens and Natoli); or the term “postmodernism” was extended and strengthened in order to analyze the present as well, so that “the ‘postmodern’ highlights what is singular and original in the contemporary era”. The contemporary epoch thus becomes the period of a new postmodernity, a new “postmodern adventure” (2001 Best and Kellner, 2). For the analysis of the post-postmodern novel, the term “realism” was introduced in order to describe the return to traditional forms of narrative and storytelling. The phrase “neo-realism” suggests that the adoption of realist modes of representation



does not mean a return to the belief system of traditional realism (see Claviez and Moos).

In the following discussion we will take the path of cautious differentiations. The term "realism" is here used to designate new developments in post-postmodern fiction, in spite of the fact that this term and its variations, "neorealism" or "new neorealism", bring with them epistemological and aesthetic complications. Since these terms have been employed all over in the debate about post-postmodern fiction to describe the counter-model against postmodern narrative, it does not seem to make sense to thematize the term's dubious implications in this short overview. To avoid complications in the argument we will use the term "realism" but dispense with further differentiations, and we will employ the phrase "metaphorically" as a short-cut into the discussion of contemporary narrative, knowing very well that the "realist" mode of representation in fiction has never ceased to exist, even in the high time of postmodernism, as a rival approach to literature, and that the realism or neorealism of the post-postmodern novel in fact comprises many different realisms, their characteristics often depending on the way and degree they incorporate the postmodern strategies of representing uncertainties and incomprehensibilities. The mixtures of concepts, approaches, and styles make the post-postmodern changes in fiction appear less radical and much less clear than suggest the announcement and celebration of a new realism as the latest stage of literary development. Doubts have to be raised, when, following the tradition of celebrating the new as progress in the arts, the "rebirth" of realism is considered as a new stage of advance in literature, as the revival of common sense (see Shechner, Rebein). In our argument, we will leave the more aggressive variants of pro-realism and anti-postmodernism to one side, and will instead consider the new modes of representation in fiction as the result of a new concentration on experience, experience of the world and the self in a wider, social and cultural sense. Without much theory, one returns to the elemental source of narrative, which is storytelling, now, however, filtered in various ways through epistemological and aesthetic insights and artistic practices of postmodernism.

The decline of postmodern aesthetics obviously came when in the final stage of postmodernism, innovation deteriorated to an empty principle that did not create but denied meaning without devising

other meaning; when the excessive complexity or complex simplicity of the text began to overstrain the capacity and the patience of the recipient with an overcoded, unfocused, self-serving experimentality that, instead of creating the impulse to decode the text, led many readers and viewers rather to resistance and boredom. We will later give two examples. In addition to this exhaustion of the postmodern axioms, there were of course political, social, and cultural reasons for the decline as well. One might speculate that the rather stagnant period of the Cold War, with its putative stability originating from the attempt on both sides to safeguard the balance of power and the status quo, left more space for the extreme formal and "irrelevant," anti-social, purely aesthetic experiments of the postmodern arts than had the following period of political upheaval. The fall of the Soviet Empire and the victory of Capitalism (Fukuyama) changed the situation. The idea of the end of, or vacation from, history propagated in the eighties was replaced by a new fall into time, which made it necessary to find new answers and solutions in politics, and also in social and cultural studies and the arts. As mentioned, the answer in art was a new appreciation of social and cultural experience. The new requirements notwithstanding, the radical postmodern aesthetic experiments retained a certain influence because, although they had very limited social functions, their basis — the epistemological, anthropological and ontological uncertainties of the time — persisted and left indelible traces on the modes of realism too.

The time since the nineties is here understood as a transitional era with many uncertainties and simultaneous developments, which make it difficult, if not impossible, to present a detailed diagnosis as to its profile, its attributes and its efficacy, let alone name and categorize it with a classifying judgement. What can be said at the outset, however, is that the prevailing conditions in the media and entertainment society both simplified and complicated the situation of the arts: simplified it by the growing hegemony of culture which tended to influence and support, to integrate and absorb under its own terms what was written in fiction; and complicated it by the fact that under the hegemony of culture, it became more difficult for literature and the visual arts to strive for that which for modernism and postmodernism was an undoubted goal and precondition of serious art, namely its autonomy and its ability to surprise, its penchant to provoke and break with the old. Since in contrast to

modernism and postmodernism, the post-postmodern reorientation of the arts mostly happened as a co-evolution with culture with its multicultural trends and its market, social and cultural issues played a greater role than they did before. Ironically enough, the conceptual elevation of culture to a hegemonial status that reduced the role of aesthetics in its own terms was heavily influenced by the postmodern deconstructive turn. Only after the deconstruction of conventional authorities, of totalizing concepts or seemingly universal verities — such as religion, nation, society, personality, moral law, progress of reason, tradition (which have lost their status as ideas of wholeness and have become collages) — culture would attain a new umbrella function. It has come to coordinate the social and the aesthetic, the popular and the elitist, past and present, simplicity and complexity, sameness and difference, connecting the one to the other, offering for every phenomenon contexts that take it out of its isolation and relativize its position, including the (elitist) authoritative position of the arts. It was only consequential that the novel would remove or at least reduce the (postmodern) barriers to understanding that impeded the accessibility of the narrative and its cultural message..

Under the hegemony of cultural experience, the link between the (nervous) optimism of the present and the pessimism of the past came to establish a pool of potential positional combinations and relativizations, including the conjunction of affirmation and negation, in art and literature as well. They led to contradictions in the intellectual and aesthetic culture between pride in technology and skepticism about science, between the belief in the dialogue of cultures and the fear of a war of cultures, between belief in progress without memory and the cult of memory without trust in the future — in short, to the contrast between the optimistic sense of a new departure and the pessimistic feeling of having exhausted the given constructive and beneficial possibilities of change and moral growth. If one takes these uncertainties, hopes and fears seriously and carries them beyond play and ironic subversion, the contrasting viewpoints allow again the creation of elemental narrative dynamics, the establishment of contrary poles of moods, sensibilities, characters, morals, thoughts, and feelings, and thus make it possible, even necessary, to thematize and dramatize anew the human field of experience, experience of both the positive and the negative influences in life (while postmodern literature had neglected, even

opposed thinking in dualities). This return of fiction to "life" of course stimulated the search for adequate narrative forms. Yet there are limits to the human creative spirit and its power of innovation. After the extreme defamiliarizations and deconstructions in twentieth-century literature and art, there was no space left for a new avantgarde. Literature had to be satisfied with small variations of that which already had been experimented with, with experimental mixtures of the given and the inclusion of the problematics of the present. What one could build upon was that which connects modernism, postmodernism, and the new realism: the fundamental desire for narrative, for its ability to familiarize the world, to make connections, and to create models of understanding. The choice of realism in fiction was not an isolated phenomena but could depend on analogic preferences in politics and culture. After the fall of the Soviet Empire and the failure of programmatic ideologies, a common effort emerged to move toward a global pragmatic realism. The philosopher and sociologist Ulrich Beck has called his latest book "For a Cosmopolitical Realism". Just as the new realism in politics and social programs sought to improve the modes of communication and advance mutual understanding and the sense of order, the realist ventures in literature aimed at repairing the lack of communication in fiction with an intersubjectively guaranteed system of representation and at creating artistic forms of order within the inundated texture of signifiers. What could integrate these efforts and give them a meaningful artistic structure was the familiarizing and healing power of telling and interpreting stories.

The return of realism did not trigger jubilant reactions with the writers concerned, who knew very well that many compromises were necessary in the concepts, structures, and styles of fiction but decided to accept the epistemological limitations of realism as obvious and go on from there with a new experimentalism, whose defamiliarizing devices appeared as important as the realist agenda, a perception which prevented them from proclaiming a new program of pure realist innovation. Though the postmodernists could not respond to the challenges of the era of realist reorientation, because they regarded the desire for the real as illusory and replaced it with the concepts of knowledge or rather lack of knowledge, of subversion, of irony, free play, and the incomprehensible paradox, their spirit of deconstruction and defamiliarization could help the realists to find

their own way towards the balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the explainable and the unexplainable. In 1997, DeLillo said in an interview in *The New York Times*: “what’s been missing over these past twenty-five years is the sense of a manageable reality”, but he adds: “We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then”. According to Italo Calvino, it would be indeed simplistic and faulty after all the modernizations of art and literature to believe that one could still tell a story in a naive manner. In his view, literature has to be prepared to meet a world that is built and controlled by the intellect. The central question for all post-postmodern writers then would be, how can narration find a way in-between the refound storytelling impulse and the reflection of a world defined by intellectuality? Literature should take the intellect under its roof, Calvino said. It is literature that can present the intellect with a “strict geometry” but in an “indissoluble tangle” so that the intellect is forced to make fantastic headstands in its very own region, normality, and thus find out its abnormality. Though Calvino is one of the foremost postmodern writers, this “antifinalistic” view of what he calls the “irritating engagement” of literature would be, if interpreted nonrestrictively, not a bad description of the kinds of narrative that follow the postmodern era. David Foster Wallace called their approach “neurotic realism”, the neurosis of realism being the postmodern heritage.

The most general description of the post-postmodern novel would have to underline a return to the three paradigms of ordering the world that characterize the American novel in general and that postmodern fiction tried to relativize or negate but confirmed even ex negativo because they contain universal truths. These narrative patterns are: (1) a system of dualisms, building upon the elementary oppositions of good and evil, nature and civilization, knowledge and nonknowledge, identity and nonidentity, in short, order and chaos; (2) the contrast between the American Dream and American reality, between the humanistic ideals of freedom, equality, and happiness for all and the failure to realize them; (3) the difference between appearance and reality, which is the paradigm of the European realistic novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is directed, also in its American form, towards the analysis of the relationship between the individual and society, including the examination of moral standards and moral hypocrisy. The introduction into this framework

of the awareness of the fundamental uncertainty and indefiniteness in all spheres of life required the transgression of the normal, the ordinary, and the explainable and their confrontation of the characters with the abnormal, the extraordinary, and the unexplainable. These new experiments with negation profited from postmodern perspectives and their narrative strategies, insofar as they emphasized mobility and the void, the mysterious and the grotesque.

One continuing legacy of the deconstructive turn and the postmodern experimentalism is that change, mobility, and becoming have to be accepted as the defining constituents of our world and also of the identity of the individual. Almost all the characters in whatever type of novel in the contemporary literary scene are more mobile than they traditionally used to be, they experience breaks in their lives and careers, explained or unexplained, they change their lives out of rational or irrational reasons, and are more instable in their thoughts and feelings than the modernist concept of the authenticity of character would allow. It seems that the introduction of this inner and outer mobility is one of the factors that makes the reintroduction of full-sized characters and their leading role in fiction acceptable, just as the greater role of mobility as chance, coincidence, and the break of sequence and logic strengthened the new re-evaluation of plot. The fundamental mobility of making sense creates indefiniteness, uncertainty, and instability in the ways of life, in thoughts and feelings, and thus provides a basic ambiguity, which in some ways is not so disssimilar to the ambiguities of the modern novel. The response is what Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* called "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (150). As a character in DeLillo's *Underworld* remarks, in "the Kennedy years [...] well-founded categories began to seem irrelevant [...] a certain fluid movement became possible" (571). All of the novels named in the following passages can be cited as examples of these trends towards a more complex, mobile, or fluid view of character and plot, a tendency which includes in a number of cases the combination of the "real" and the fantastic, the fantastic being another legacy of the postmodern narrative, indicating a greater mobility within the modes of representing the world.

## 10.2. The Gap and the Void, The Mysterious and the Grotesque

A second postmodern legacy, closely related to the first, is the gap or the void, which are present in almost all postmodern texts in one way or another. The gap and the void also take their place in the novels since the nineties. They appear in the lives, the experiences and thoughts of the characters, in the plot and its sequence and in the interpretation or rather interpretability of the characters or the themes that they impersonate, for instance love. The ineffable takes the form of a mystery, a “paradoxical verity” (Coover) that disrupts the continuity and explainability of what happens and is the only unity and wholeness that exists. Contrasting the modes of our existence in a matter-of-fact style, the new sobriety finds its field of experiment in the opposition of two poles: (1) the everyday life, its striving for happiness and solidarity, and its failure to combine both, and (2) the mystery, embodied in unexplainable and uncontrollable change, change in emotion, thought, personality, or circumstances. What makes the life of these people interesting and gives them their universal aspect is that between the ordinary everyday life and the extraordinary personal turn, there is a void, both promising and refusing possibilities. The different types of novels that use it certify to the wide range of this structural pattern. At this point examples may be listed without further explanation, to which we will add later: Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (1986); Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy: City of Glass, Ghosts, The Locked Room* (1988) and his later novels; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987) or *Paradise* (1997); Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997); Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (1998); Cormac McCarthy's Southern novels and his *Western Border Trilogy, All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1995), *Cities of the Plain* (1998); Louise Erdrich, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), or *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2000); and all the novels of the writers of the so-called “New American School”: Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, David Foster Wallace, and Richard Powers, a number of whose works we will discuss later in more detail.

One might argue that the important role of the mysterious derives from the fact that it actually functions as the “substitute” for the creation of new form. Once the character faces existential gaps of

knowledge and the writer or narrator gives up his or her attitude of omniscience and absolute authority, the mysterious can provide all styles of narrative with a paradoxical focal point, a puzzling concrete target, an imprecise and unclosed narrative argument ( the target being a person, border-crossings, a striking event, the people of a town, the atomic bomb, the overflow of waste, the Vietnam War, etc.). Working with the gap, the void, the mysterious as central modes of conception, discourse may turn into a riddle without having to define it or relate it to the interiority of the self or relativize it in the modern way by the wholeness and autonomy of aesthetic form, in Lukács's terms the "ersatz for God". The riddle then is in fact the narrative form. By circling around, questioning, protesting, or accepting the inexplicable, a certain new freedom of approach, of the dissemination of perspectives, of the deferral of judgement, of a doubling and multiplying of stories can be attained.

The disappearance of certainty and the emergence of the uncertain and inexplicable, of the gap and the mystery of the void are wide-spread phenomena in the post-postmodern novel. The mysterious often grows out of the grotesque, the deformation of humans by humans, which acts as the basis and cause of the mysterious and gives it a critical aspect. Jean-Francois Lyotard had defined "the postmodern condition" as "that which searches for new presentations [...] in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81). The search for new presentations of the unrepresentable, of the radical perspectives of negation was a postmodern concern. Thus the interrelation of the mysterious and the grotesque is also a postmodern legacy. Coover's postmodern novel *John's Wife* (1996), for instance, thematizes "grotesque miscreations" (96), combined with "the elusive mystery masked by surface flux" (249). "The Mystery" (216) as the base and end of all efforts to attain knowledge in a rationally understood universe is the ground on which the paradox rests. In "a paradox-ridden universe of ours, bereft of certainties" (370), John's wife is placed at "the dark inscrutable heart of paradox" (285). Paul Auster, a quite different author, who does not belong to the close circle of postmodern writers, takes up the theme of the mystery of life. Referring to his *Moon Palace* (1989), *The Music of Chance* (1990), and also to *The New York Trilogy*, he notes: "The unknown is rushing in on top of us at every moment. As I see it, my job is to keep myself open to these collisions, to watch out for all



these mysterious goings-on in the world” (1992 273). A long line of writers take up a similar program and connect it with the grotesque. In the following paragraphs, a few widely different examples will be discussed.

In DeLillo's *Underworld* the force of history appears as the force of the grotesque, the (self)destruction of humans by humans, but it is also the appearance of the mysterious. Waste is the secret “underhistory” of the atomic tests; the garbage side of nuclear weapons; waste, is the mysterious “underworld” in persons, relations and objects. Nick Shay, the waste specialist and main character of the book, sees waste “everywhere because it is everywhere” (283). Below the relativizing circumstances of the quotidian and the fragmented structure of the book lies the mystery of the “contradictions of being [...] the inner divisions of people and systems” (444), the infinite fatality of distorting deadly connections that all center on the atomic bomb and produce chaos. Secrecy, the unknown, the mystery of relations that leave open gaps, problems, and questions characterize all people in the book in one way or another. In an earlier interview DeLillo said about his novel *White Noise*: “I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one at all, is outside the book” (DeCurtis 55). The grotesque, the origin and foundation of the mysterious human “underworld”, has its own image in the epilogue of the book. Nick visits a “downwind” radiation clinic, called by the guide Victor the “Museum of the Misshapen”, located at a remote site in Kazakhstan, the former territory of the Soviet Union, where the victims of the nuclear arms' race are shut away in order to be “studied” in their misshapeness:

It is the victims who are blind. It is the boy with skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow. It is the bald-headed children standing along a wall in their underwear, waiting to be examined. It is the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing. It is the dwarf girl who wears a T-shirt advertising a Gay and Lesbian Festival in Hamburg, Germany, bottom edge dragging on the floor. It is the cheerful cretin who walks the halls with his arms folded. It is the woman with features intact but only half a face somehow, everything fitted into a tilted arc that floats above her shoulders like the crescent moon (800).

Philip Roth in his later books changed his focus to concentrate on a larger social scene. In his novel *American Pastoral*, Nathan

Zuckerman, the narrator, writes about the life of Swede Levov, a former star athlete from his school, whom he met at a class reunion, and who as a “superman of certainties” (144) “had been most simple and ordinary [...] right in the American grain”. He becomes interesting for the narrator because the Swede experienced a painstaking “tragic fall” by the “explosion of his daughter's bomb in 1968”, killing four people in an anti-Vietnam War terror act. The act of his daughter during “that mysterious, troubling, extraordinary, historical transition” is “chaos from start to finish”, an inexplicable act of “the grotesque [...] supplanting everything commonplace that people love about this country” (348). It “transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral – into the indiginous American berserk” (86). It is indeed “the end of all understanding”: “the inexplicable had forever displaced whatever he once thought he knew” (265f.). In the end, there are only “*this horrible riddle*” (131), “its mysterious inroads” (123), and “the mystery of his mystery” (30), which in spite of the Swede's unbearable suffering “cannot be cracked by thinking”. The breach in his fortification “now that it was opened would not be closed again” (423).

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* ranges in time over more than eighty years from the Reconstruction to the 1970s, and in space from Louisiana to Oklahoma, creating a kind of black American saga of attaining freedom by going west. It focuses on a double exodus of emancipated black families who follow a utopian inspiration: first from the Mississippi Delta trekking westward to the Territories, finally establishing their own town with the telling name of Haven. Then there is second exodus after the town falls into hopeless decline, initiated by the Depression. The new settlement, Ruby, an all-black town with the population of 360, 240 miles west of Haven, is founded in a spirit of nostalgia and new hope for the future. But hope does not last. Uncertainty leads to intolerance and grotesque violence and ends in the feeling that human desires, emotions, and thoughts are inexplicable in their extreme consequences. The central mystery at the end turns into the form of a riddle: “How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world it had escaped?” (292) The utopian spirit, the trust in God, the sense of care, of mutual responsibility, and communal spirit, which were the reasons for their

double exodus, finally have reversed themselves into the spirit and the deeds of the grotesque, the deformation of humans by humans, the senseless killing of a motley of homeless women outsiders, drifters, who have gathered more or less by chance in a strange place, in the so-called "Convent", seventeen miles outside the town. Tony Morrison, a symbolic realist, has fitted the characters and the plot into a broad symbolic plan, a pattern of faith and and mystery, the mystery of faith, the reification of faith, the surfacing of evil and, at the end, the mystery of spiritual redemption, born out of the grotesqueness and mystery of evil. This book, like the others defined by the spirit of mystery, demonstrates the loss of innocence and faith, the paralyzing force of tradition, and the blighting consequences of emotional and physical violence — but also the never-dying spirit of hope.

In Cormac McCarthy's novels the stage of mystery is not the human world but the universe. Humans participate in the mystery and stem themselves against it by violent action. He thematizes human perversity and vice, evil in its inexplicable form, the fact "that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (1994 a 45). The novels of the *Border Trilogy* are exercises in unprovoked violence and evil, not to be motivated and understood by any psychologizing but to be affirmed in their inexplicable presence that is projected upon a barren, violent, torturedly beautiful, inconsolable landscape and rendered in an utterly detached blend of conventional and surreal styles. Their behavior testifying to an irrational, immoral, even unnatural anti-common sense, John Grady Cole of *All the Pretty Horses* and Billy Parham of *The Crossing* traverse on horseback the border between the American Southwest and Mexico, between civilization and nature, the known and the unknown, between order and chaos, intentionally or instinctively in search of the ultimate experience in a universe that is empty of sense, and in whose world of the unknowable and the void only violence can state the individual presence. *The Crossing* is not so much a sequence of *All the Pretty Horses* than a loose variation of its themes of trial, violence, loss, manhood, fate, all in the same geographical constellation of border-crossing, thus emphasizing the elemental, mythic quality of their experiences. In this kind of universe, "the light of the world was in men's eyes for the world itself moved in eternal darkness and darkness was its true nature and true condition and [...] in this darkness it turned with perfect cohesion in all its parts but [...] there

was naught there to see” (1994 a 283). The old human stories are here acted out again and again, destined to doom, but indefatigably repeated in inexplicable cruelty and kindness and a sense of mystery, the mystery of being only oneself, the mystery of “mak[ing] the world. To make it again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing” (1994b 56). In the posthumanistic and postsocial spirit of these books which offer no consolation beyond the self and its power, the grotesqueness of violence loses its antihumanistic context and stands out in a neutral space of non-evaluation and mystery that takes on atavistic traits.

It is obvious that the post-postmodern novel of the nineties, still under the direct influence of the postmodern experiments, also participates in games with the gap, the void and the mysterious, even if it chooses a realist method. Whereas McCarthy's novels radicalize and universalize the mystery of cruelty and violence in the transhuman sphere, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) radicalizes the mystery of grotesqueness in the human domain. The series of violent murders committed by the Wall Street entrepreneur and serial killer Patrick Bateman, the “monster of reality” (304) in *American Psycho*, remains without cause and consequence, without synchronization with character, social condition or circumstances, or justice since the murderer goes without punishment and tells his own story without emotion or productive insights but with the most gruesome details of his unmotivated, unimaginable atrocities. To the grotesque mystery of the murders is added the mystery of the uninterpretability of the murderer, whose self-reflective insights are invalidated by the laconic, unemotional, unengaged tone in which he reports them and their remaining unconnected to what one would call a character's self and by his terrible urge “to engage [...] in homicidal behavior on a massive scale” (338). The report of both his deeds and his thoughts remains on a consistent level of mere description that does not point to anything beyond itself: “I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties and [...] it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some of what I'm doing actually is” (345). By reducing both factual description and meaning-giving reflection to the emptiness of words, Ellis makes them ironize one another in what one might call a “performance” of meaninglessness. In Bateman's comment: “there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling [...]

This confession has meant nothing” (377). Ironically Ellis's realist minimalism turns out to be a form of maximalism in the deconstruction of meaning, following and radicalizing the line of Hawkes's *The Cannibal*, Heller's *Catch 22*, Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

What connects all these divergent books, and many others too, is, to quote Auster again, “the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of human experience” (1992 262). The texts demonstrate that the category of the mysterious can have two quite different foundations, an ethical one, provided by the grotesque, and an epistemological one, furnished by the random, the simultaneous, and contradictory, in short, by the radically strange and uncertain. In the first case the mysterious is human-centered; in the second it is cosmos-oriented and called fate, randomness, emptiness, and chaos. Both kinds of course blend, but the relationship of dominance between the two gives the individual novel its individual contours. In all these cases the novel attempts to give over-all uncertainty an image and to define it in a narrative design of order and chaos, however, without any longer being able to relate order and chaos in a meaningful way. There is always the gap and the void. Ellis's *American Psycho* proceeds furthest in transferring the meaninglessness directly into the realist style. The author splits up the representational system of realism, which consists of description and interpretation, and places the gap, the void within the representational form, the realist rhetoric, so that there is no connection between quotidian surface details and interpretative meaning, leaving a space of emptiness between the two which represents chaos. If one looks at this style of splitting description and interpretation from the postmodern viewpoint, what we have here then reveals itself as an intentionally counterfeit realism, an ironic subversion of the illusion, one that could directly represent and make sense of the real. Ellis's procedure is actually a combination of two aspects of the postmodern paradox (which in contrast to the modern paradox refuses any kind of meaningful synthesis), one inherent in the content, the other ingrained in the form. Both together create a parody of realism but at the same time a confirmation of realism — however, a realism that reveals the limits and the illusion of realism by a serial mode of merely performing empty representation, which does not have a meaningful frame of reference beyond chaos.

### 10.3. Strategies of Excess

As has already been indicated, a third legacy of postmodern fiction is the penchant for maximalism in every form, in short, for excess. One example may demonstrate how this method of excess in the late stage of postmodern fiction finally deconstructs itself, overreaching its possibilities and turning too far into the area of the “impossible”, to quote Sukenick's description of the postmodern agenda. The example is Robert Coover's *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut* (2002), a very late upshot of postmodern fiction. Two other books may illustrate how the strategies of excess outside the “classic” postmodern fiction are successfully employed in two novels of the nineties that belong to the best fiction in the last stage of the twentieth century. Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul* (1991) is successful by psychologizing excess, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) by multiple coding that blurs the borderlines between surface and depth, serialism and existentialism, the serious and the comic, analysis and entertainment. According to *The Seattle Times*, it is “a work of genius [...] grandly ambitious, wickedly comic, a wild, surprisingly readable tour de force”.

William Gass's *The Tunnel* (1995), which was 30 years in progress, already shows a certain depletion of the postmodern strategies of excess, especially in the book's formal schemes. Their failures become more visible ten years after its publication. Gass seeks multiple and extreme ways of fracturing the standard use and continuous course not only of the story but also of the language, of the script types, of the arrangement of the text, of the texture and design of the page. He inserts poetry into the prose and underlays the language with an exhaustive, rather disturbing, and functionless network of dirty words, which might be seen, if one wants to be sarcastic, to serve as a special kind of contribution to the pool of linguistic innovation. All these means of fragmentation become repetitive, redundant, and boring because they are not really complemented with a variation of perspectives that would add to the formal exertions the lightness of play, the most important and efficient postmodern modal strategy. What is missing in the over-complexity of the text is what has been called, paradoxically, an “arbitrary necessity”. The book is a striking example of what the

ideology of innovation can do to a writer at the end of an epoch, when it becomes his strait-jacket. Compared with this, the post-postmodern novel has one advantage, if it is an advantage: It is able to start without ideological obligations.

While Gass's *Tunnel* reveals signs of exhaustion, Coover's novel *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut* (2002) is the perfect example of the final decay of the "classic" postmodern narrative and the distortion of its compelling urge towards innovation. It seems as if (and not only for Coover) the obsession with the (male) body and its sexual organ is the last resort for innovation at the end of its turn, where the writer hopes to regain its shock effect. In this book the adventures of Lucky Pierre, part pornstar, part clown, part everyman, filmed by his nine female muse-directors in the utopian/dystopian frozen Cinecity, are arranged around his famous, oversized, naked sexual organ, always in public view in film and "reality" (the difference between the two evaporating) and admired and rejoiced in by his muses, each with her own creative and sexual inclinations and obsessions, and by the jubilant public as well. Pierre's "serial experiences" (117), riding on his "dick", are conceived as an "archetypal drama" (272), fusing sexual and artistic potency in the tradition of Henry Miller. Yet in spite of the book's outrageous sexual fantasies and metamorphoses, Pierre's adventures are not saved from finally boring the reader by repetition and excess. This excess in repetition and variation characterizes parties and grand orgies ("decaying into chaos" [171]), film projections, demonstrations, riots, and "guerilla warfare" (287). Excess also shows in the multicoding of Pierre's adventures, which, in addition to being existentialized through suffering and pain, gain additional dimensions by the ways they parody and caricature (and are parodied and caricatured by) clichés of heroism, of "the mysterious stranger, the prodigal son, the legendary righter of wrongs" (289), or stereotypes of fairy tales and the "sacred quest" "on the perilous path, as it is said, to the center of all existence" (317). The ramifications of the sexual organ penetrate "deep in the universal essence" (269), linking (ironically) the "visionary mode of fucking" "mysteriously [...] to an eternal truth" (135), to the "DEVOUT EFFORT TO ATTAIN TRANSCENDENCY; TO UNIFY THE WORLD'S MAD SCATTER" (137) and ultimately to the divine order. The identity question is clarified by defining the novel's "antiestablishment hero"

(289) simply as “a man who fucks”, with fucking as “his karma” (135), a man “who will fuck, in effect, the city itself, and thus the world and, in so doing, will save it from itself” (315). In spite of his unlimited metamorphoses and the disrupted codes of order that are all “fucked up” (327), he is presented as a man who “wants continuity” (215) but “has no free will” (213), who is “chased by an indiscriminate flood of humanity” (224). As a “living legend” who was “once the idol of the masses” (275), he becomes in his older age the victim of “pain and humiliation” (283), a “castaway” (373), the mere model for robots that are formed as imitations of “his various career phases” and are the “hottest product” (343) when sold. He feels himself “parodied” (86), his “empty desolation” (326) verifies “the old maxim: Aesthetic interest in a subject sucks away that subject’s being” (381), and underlines what one of the directors notes: “Who or what is he beyond these movies we have made together?” (386) He finally comes to mirror the “general uncertainty” (251) accompanying heroism and human existence in general. The people in the novel are “all performance, living invented lives of the scripted moment, otherwise just negative space”; “Ceaseless flow, that’s the ticket. Even if of nothing but emptiness” (390). The “search for meaning” appears more like an effort “to obliterate meaning” (393), but the “ineffable mystery remains. This is the one truth he has” (395). The book, however, ends with “sublime joy”, a final consummation which has “never been as good as this, he is being carried completely out of himself” (405). The postmodern concepts and practices of “simultaneity and multiplicity and disruption” (173) are here meant to parody by shock the clichés of traditional narrative, of meaning, of beliefs, of concepts of identity, but again they overreach themselves by excess and parody their own intentions and strategies. Intended or not, the result is the parody of parodies, the parody of postmodern strategies. In addition, whatever direction the double-coded parody may take, it ironizes, and in turn is ironized by, the existential exposure of the anti-hero within the great sex hero to the pains of disappointment, of loneliness and homelessness, which introduce the realist view into the fantastic compositions of the book, together with the universal themes of the contrast between the past and the present, between gain and loss, happiness and pain. Other postmodern novelists (especially Pynchon, Gaddis and Barth, but also Coover in his earlier books) have been successful with the introduction and



often fusion of the existential view with the playful and the comic perspectives, with irony and parody. This novel's melange, however, is not much more than a piece of late and desperate post-modern sportsmanship, in which none of the parts fit together under any terms.

The strategy of excess employed by a calculating aesthetic intellectuality (or intellectual aesthetics) of course is not by definition something negative. The most outstanding postmodern novels by Pynchon, Barth, Gaddis and others achieve their greatest literary successes by the strategies of excess. They may express themselves in complications of plot, the cast of characters, in the multicoding of perspectives, or the exuberance in style and the complexity of the general approach. The scheme of excess is one of the legacies of postmodern art that even after the high time of postmodern literature had ended could still create very important literary works by the infusion of new energy. Its adoption by two authors outside the well-known circle of postmodern writers, Harold Brodkey in *The Runaway Soul* and David Foster Wallace in *Infinite Jest*, created two masterpieces, in spite of the inherent problems of lateness and the too-much that we discussed above. It is clear that the transitional situation of the nineties was broad enough to allow the design, so to speak belatedly, of two of the most radical narrative experiments in literary history, whose innovative constructedness and scarcely contained excessiveness would hardly have been possible without the postmodern experiments and their continuing influence. What connects these formally and thematically quite contrary experiments is the obvious passion for multimodality, for fullness of perspectives on life, for completeness, which in both cases motivate and justify excess. In the one case excess is the means of researching the mysteries of the human mind and soul in the ramifications of a person's consciousness, and in the other case the mode of excess is used to register the mysteries of human behavior in an observation of an enormous number of characters, mostly centered in a limited space, the region of Boston. What connects these two extraordinary novels with the fiction of the nineties in general is the important status assigned to the unexplainable, the ineffable, and the mysterious, which in these cases, as in the others, results from the complexity of human minds and conditions.

Harold Brodkey's novel, with the apt title *The Runaway Soul*, follows a psycho-aesthetic line and employs the method of excess for the search into the complications of consciousness, not so much into the authenticity of a character, which would have been the modern variant. This strategy allows the fusion of existential question with a multicolored and playful approach. According to a publicity notice, the book focuses on the extraordinary sensibility of the mentally quick, obsessively ruminative, alternatively grandiose and self-doubting mind and imagination of a Wiley Silenowicz. The 835-page novel has been rightly called "an epic adventure in consciousness", whose teeming, converging, refracting ideas, feelings, and attitudes become both self-serving and serving to color "the compulsive concern with his mother's overpowering nature, his father's seductiveness, his sister's pathological jealousy, his own mystical yearning for oneness", and later, in adolescence and adulthood, the various permutations of sexuality in a ceaseless search for love. All this is undertaken with a rash and shameless, tender, and fearless attitude, for which nothing is alien, and which thematically is ultimately directed towards the question of good and evil and its relevance to him and the persons he is related to. The search for unity in multiplicity is here obsessively personalized and at the same time radically extended and transpersonalized by the excessive, multifarious, multimodal ruminations of "the Runaway Soul", "flying and trying and crying and lying and dying". The vagaries of the mind in action produce endless processes and no final results. The Runaway Soul must run and never stop. An end and completeness cannot be attained by lasting insights because truth is fluid and moving. Since truth is complex, it moves in both exhilarating and painful variations of projections and modalities of consciousness, never allowing the person to know which is more important, mind and soul or the conditions and interrelations in which a person finds himself or herself. The book is a successful integration of the existential, the playful, and the ironic ruminations of the mind, or, to use the term of the book, the "soul" (a term that both postmodern and post-postmodern fiction mostly do not know what to make of), because the excessive and boundless musings of the mind are contained, bound, and dramatized by always pushing against the limits of human consciousness.

While Brodkey's novel chooses the multimodality and the dynamics of the inner view as guideline, employing excess to explore the flow of the mental and emotional life, David Foster Wallace's again aptly named, 1079-page novel *Infinite Jest*, which has been rightly compared to Beckett, Pynchon, and Gaddis, provides a cool view from outside, diving into the richness of human behavior with a limitless imagination, a disruptive energy, an audaciously inventive prose, and a weird fun game. Wallace's book is unwieldy by its length, by its excess in language games, and by its enormous cast of mostly "whacked-out" characters imprisoned in their souls' cages, often differentiated only through their peculiarities, forming a collection of names that act as strategic meeting points along which the story travels in a serial composition, relying on the situation as the ordering principle but keeping the balance between situation and theme, and developing images of a few main characters. The free-wheeling linguistic style fabricates fantastically chapter headings and an immense quantity of interspersed abbreviations for important institutions and programs that are hardly available in their complicated meaning to the reader over a longer stretch of time, and finally adds 388 footnotes, which contrast in tone and matter to the light, playful, ironic, and comic tenor of the main part of the book and yet, like the rush of abbreviations and the peculiar chapter headings, at the same time confirm the ironic touch of the infinite jest by being disruptive to the text's flow and disturbing to the reader. This disruptive tendency is strengthened by a composition that changes its place, characters, and scene almost every chapter, giving equal room to people, things, and space, fashioning a sequence without logical system, except for an anxious sense for oppressive details adding them up as specimens of a crippled existence.

The factual base of the story is an addicts' halfway house and a tennis academy, with the competitive activities surrounding the tennis game. The family of the former director of the tennis academy, Dr. James Incandenza (who committed suicide), his wife, and their three sons, Orin, Hal and Mario, and then Don Gately, cook and shopper at the Ennet House, are the main characters, surrounded by a crowd of pupils from the tennis academy and inmates of Ennet House. The satiric perspective, which, just like the comic mode, is always present in one way or another, has its own specific playing field in a sideline of the plot, the hilarious interface of two operators of the Office of

Unspecified Services, a Canadian espionage and terror organization. They are the wheel-chaired Marathe and the bizarrely disguised Steely, hidden in the outfit of a woman, who meet under fantastic circumstances and in mutual distrust on a cliff outcropping high above the city of Tuscon in Arizona. All the characters in the book are distanced, flattened, and even obscured. They appear, in a calculated tour de force, as strange, eccentric, weird, even fantastic in their threatened condition, the term for which is “stasis”. The representation of the main characters, however, is split between the flatness of their appearance and their implied roundness, just as the narrator's attitude towards them is split between the clinical outside view and an empathetic attitude of participation that honors their feelings of loss, disappointment, and frustration. This method provides both a tension and a balance that keep up an equilibrium between negation and affirmation, seriousness and infinite jest, and respect for the individual human beings and their subordination under an overall playful configuration. The novel achieves its challenging and provocative, consistently innovative distinction by turning the postmodern strategies of deconstruction and excess, of play, irony, and the comic mode into an infinite jest, as the title indicates. While the book uses the postmodern scheme for building up a text “both free-associative and intricately structured” (185), the direction of the infinite jest, in a profound study of the postmodern condition, turns on the postmodern theories and practices themselves. They are used, played with, and ironized at the same time. The book is a success in a nonpostmodern way because it becomes clear that in all its movements and with all available narrative strategies, it circles around the enigma of human existence, which is the secret center of the book.

Still, the book is excessively complex, and even in a successful case like this the question finally must be posed as to how far this complexity is complex for complexity's sake and for the unlimited playfulness it allows. The answer would be that on the one hand it responds to the utter uncertainty of human existence and the extreme complexity of the situation of life at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the writer chooses and experiments with the strategies of a “putter-inner”, not a “leaver-outer”, to use Thomas Wolfe's distinction of types of writers. That is, Wallace places himself within the line of aesthetic maximalism, which has its own logic of always

pushing to further limits in order to try out and “complete” aesthetic possibilities of complexities. These complexities have occupied the some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, Joyce in *Ulysses*, Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gaddis in *The Recognitions*, Barth in *The Sotweed Factor* or Coover in *The Public Burning*, all of them busy adding new subjects, new perspectives, new forms, and, with Wallace, the fun games of the Infinite Jest in the attempt to further the role and the capacity of literature of representing the largeness and enigma of human consciousness. As to Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, one must say that it is a worthy experiment in this line, adding to aesthetic maximalism fun and “huge entertainment” (*Review of Contemporary Fiction*). The result of this mixture is impressive, whether one likes it or not.

#### 10.4. Experiments with Realism and the Social View

At this point our discussion turns to what is the most important contribution of the post-postmodern novel, its so-called realism. The two books by Brodkey and Wallace are extreme and atypical cases in the nineties, though they stand out for their imaginative grasp of fictional possibilities in a period of transition and definitely belong in an overview of the achievements of the post-postmodern novel. As mentioned, the scenario of the typical contemporary American novel (if there is such a thing) is defined by the recovery of the character and the social environment and often the reintroduction of social criticism, but also by the retention of the consciousness of uncertainty and indefiniteness in the definition of reality, truth, and moral values. This leads to a multimodal view of the world and the typical mixtures of perspectives: the combination of the rational with the irrational, the familiar with the unfamiliar, the ordinary with the extraordinary, the certain with the mysterious, the “good” continuation with the gap and the void. The (variable) interrelation of the explainable and the unexplainable furnishes a multiperspective on the represented world and gives it depth.

Toni Morrison in her novel *Love* provides a version of this formula, which in her novels almost always takes the structure of a paradox. In terms of her narrator, we live in a world “[w]here everything is known and nothing is understood” (4). Though the sociocritical horizon in contemporary fiction (and partly the visual

arts) suggests an attitude that makes itself “useful” and “relevant” and instructional, Toni Morrison’s books are good examples of the fact that the texts are the better the more the mysterious and the void (and unexplained violence) temper the rational, the moral, and didactic approach, as in her *Beloved* (1987). This celebrated novel is ultimately about how it feels to kill what you love, out of love, to believe it possible to love your daughter so much that her life is yours to take. In her novel *Love*, love is as much affliction and delusion as joy, and it again breeds violence. Philip Roth’s much-praised realist novels *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000) gain their impetus both by the ineffability of human behavior, in the first case by the violence of war (Vietnam) and the violent, terrorist anti-war reaction of a young American woman, in the second case by the consequences of the attempt of a college professor to hide his black heritage and pretend to be a white man. In fact, the most successful combination of the two, personal void and the scenario of the ineffable on the one hand and the rationalism and criticism of realism on the other, is achieved when both the social and the personal aspects are fused in what one might call basic elemental mixtures, mixtures of blood or gender in a character dramatized in its adaptation to the social environment. Striking examples are the white-black mixture in Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* and Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing* (2003). The undefined gender of a young girl who turns out to be a boy and the personal and social complications evolving from such a situation are the subjects of Jeffrey Eugenides’s celebrated *Middlesex* (2002). The American Indian novel gains its status and success through its natural closeness to the mysterious and ineffable, by what Scott Momaday called “the ancestral voice”, which it infuses into its realist argument and rational social criticism. Some examples include the novels by Momaday, by Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich, which are quoted below.

The gap and the void, the irrational and the inexplicable are often coupled, especially in the ethnic novel, with a thematic pattern consisting of conspiracy, violence, and terror, of victimization, victim, and paranoia. It does not take the demonic form it has in the postmodern novels of, for instance, Pynchon and Hawkes who thematize a human condition where the human being appears to be at the mercy of abstract powers that can do with a person as they please, so that the character has no choice but to accede to the role of victim,

to rebel hopelessly against it, or to do both, mostly haunted in the process by paranoia. Introduced into a specific social context, conspiracy and violence can give the the struggle for power a thriller-like matrix of drama and suspense. Victimization and the role of victim deepen and often change the character. The opposition and interrelation of violator and victim both heighten suspense and intensify the pressure on the victim. Almost all post-postmodern novels take over elements of this pattern in order to create the extraordinary in contrast to the ordinary and to use the extraordinary for a multimodal and sometimes also comic view.

An example of the simpler kind of novel is Jonathan Franzen's early novel *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988). The ordinary in this book is both the habitual routine of the city administration in St. Louis and the normal life of one of its prominent citizen. The extraordinary focuses on a plot of rivalry, conspiracy, and violence over a city renewal project. In this, Franzen's first novel, the factual base of the conspiracy story is still compounded with postmodern features of excess that hurt the plausibility of the machinations of the plot but provide the text with the characteristics of a thriller and a seriocomic perspective on top of its realist base. The major victim of the conspirations and terror is the family of Martin Probst, the leading building contractor in the city and one of its most highly respected citizens, but as the president of an association of conservative local dignitaries is also an obstacle to the renewal plans of the new female chief of police. This fact demonstrates that this book, in addition to everything else, is already a family novel in disguise, and thus the book points to further developments of the novel in the nineties and after. In the later realist books by the authors of the nineties, almost invariably the family is the ordinary base and starting point of the narrative process, from which character and plot take their way out and to which they often (have to) return (or significantly not return) in order to bear witness of experiences, and thus constituting meaning or nonmeaning between beginning and end. The "natural" family life, which as such would "normally" be conceived as a haven of security and order, is made the direct victim of the break-in of the extraordinary and the decay of order; but then the "normal" stance of "tragedy" that would fit here is lightened by the actually "unnatural" and "unfitting" comic view, which, however, under the circumstances is fitting because it is needed to complete the realistic multimodal

appearance of the human world. After Chip, one of the sons from Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, and his companions have been robbed during a political upheaval in Lithuania by the police, he thinks again of Marx's idea that tragedy in a second stage is written as farce, and now applying this "revelation" in his mind to the draft of his screenplay "The Academy Purple" left in New York, he cries out loud: "Make it *ridiculous*. Make it *ridiculous*" (534).

Jeffrey Eugenides, a colleague and friend of Franzen's, once called him in a lecture a "postpostmodernist", and this term applies to Eugenides as well. Both authors grew up "backwards", as Eugenides said. They mastered the experiment before the convention, or rather, for them the experiment actually was the convention: "Before we learned to tell stories we deconstructed them". Both Franzen's and Eugenides's later books show that they have learned to tell stories in a more sober and temperate way. The scheme of the novel they developed is double-poled. On the one hand there is a contraction of the social scene towards the family group, which could and should act as a solid foundation, though it often does not. But still, it remains a center from which its descendants could grow and prosper, though they often do not. On the other hand, this contracted scene is extended into wider social analyses and social criticism converging on the topical vices of the time and extending the geographical and social scope far beyond the home region. They are what one might term novels of "collections" because they collect and coordinate their material from all kinds of social issues, topical themes, historical events, scientific problems, conspiracy and violence, and so on.

Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001), a "book which is funny, moving, generous, brutal, and intelligent" (*The Guardian*, UK), focuses on a dysfunctional Midwestern family, the Lamberts, whose problems originate not only from outside the family as in Franzen's first novel, but from both outer and inner dilemmas: a combination of epistemological concerns, moral disorientation, and existential problems that are personified in various forms in the members of the family. Theme and character blend. Alfred, the patriarch of the family, is a retired engineer, whose life has gone to pieces while he was fighting for order in disorder. He had to realize that the "leading edge of time" and its progress made him always face a "new ungrasped world", so that the "ungrasped existence" (66) had to remain a mystery forever. He dies slowly from an illness similar to



Alzheimer's, while his wife Enid wavers between a sacrificial devotion to her husband and her children and a hopeless disappointment about the collapse of order in her family and her unfulfilled life, which she has to face after what the book calls "the Blanket of Self-Deception" (312) has been raised. All the three children are failures, show signs of moral disorientation, and get into trouble one way or the other. In their personal lives are reflected the typical contemporary American experiences: success, neurosis, depression, fun, isolation, despair, and love, the absence of love being painfully felt and its presence often hidden behind a screen of indifference. The members of the family are either unable to communicate, or they see one another in a different light. A final gathering of the family for a Christmas dinner planned by Enid as a desperate attempt to restore harmony at least for once seems to be an unattainable goal; the "catastrophic Christmas" breakfast (562) of all five members of the family turns out to be rather an obstacle to happiness than a symbol of it. The sociocritical motifs of the book reflect disorder and decay; fictitious transactions, financial fraud, and pharmaceutical "corrections" of depressed souls. The synthesis of family novel and social panorama is formulated in the leading leitmotif "corrections", which functions as a hinge between private and social aspects and creates an organic thematic center of connections. The novel develops a system of counterbalancing forces, based on the principles of opening and closing, in-going and out-going, of dividing and uniting, whose dynamics activates a kinetic momentum, which, especially at the end, after the catastrophic Christmas and during Alfred's final decline sets the hopeful signs of a regeneration of sensibility and communication against their former failings; at the same time, the novel confirms the indispensability of the comic perspective right to the end of the book. Franzen says in an essay that he has found a way back to the community of readers and writers; he has also turned to what is called a realism with a human face, which replaces, in his terms, "tragic realism".

Eugenides repeats and varies the pattern of the unnormal vs. the normal in different but also multimodal terms. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote that his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), evokes "the mixture of curiosity, lust, tenderness, morbidity, cynicism, and the naiveté surrounding these bizarre events", these bizarre events being the suicide of five doomed sisters, which changes the lives of

the men, who are fiercely and awkwardly obsessed with the women's untimely, spectacular demise. Only a year after Franzen's bestseller *Eugenides* published his own highly praised bestseller, *Middlesex* (2002). The book is about an extraordinary character, a hermaphrodite who, the first sentence of the book makes clear, "was born twice, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day, in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergence room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." The family circle, as in Franzen's *The Corrections*, is now the basis of the book. The hermaphroditic daughter, Cal, is the object of the ordinary's transformation into the extraordinary; and the local family sphere is extended into a breathtaking view of the twentieth century, the history of fifty years of Greek immigration into the United States, with the Turkish invasion of Smyrna in 1922, the flight of Cal's grandparents for their lives, and a view back to a tiny village in Asia Minor, where two lovers, Cal's grandparents and the rare genetic mutation of which Cal is the victim, set the narrator's life in motion. Added furthermore are the Second World War, the chronicle of the rise and fall of the American automobile industry, the Detroit race riots of 1967, a carefully constructed puzzle for archaeologists; a lively treatise on the question whether the genes or the society determine the destiny of a person; the report about the adventurous travel of a mutated gene through the blood of three generations and its flourishing in a small child, namely Cal, the hermaphroditic main character of the story, and finally Cal's life itself, who at the end has become a diplomat in Berlin, finally enjoying, after all the personal crises, the experiences of the double gender. What integrates all these situations, social and historic panoramas, the critical references and discussions and the characters in *Eugenides's* but also in *Wallace's* and in *Franzen's* books, is not a heroic story but rather a panorama of subtle dependencies and outside controls that define the subject in the contemporary world and that are the basis of the character's attempt (and failure) at making sense. Again the book ends with a consoling view on the main character's life.

The return of the character, however, causes certain problems, given the crisis of the humanities. One of the crucial issues in the humanities has been the status of the Subject. The central question is whether the idea of the Subject, i.e., of a coherent self and a center of consciousness, can be saved after Systems Theory has made it a

differentiated illusion, a “formula”; after Hermeneutics has placed it under the guardianship of interpretation, and the Critical Theory has focused on intersubjectivity but left the individual and his or her problems a blank spot (while Sartre, for instance, thematized the solidarity with the subject in the moment of its fall); after indeed Poststructuralism has turned the subject into the intersection of values, of trends, and influences, after Language Theory and the linguistic turn have made their own totalitarian claim, shutting in the individual in what Wittgenstein called “language games” (though the attraction of the linguistic turn has waned); and, finally, after the biological sciences have enclosed the character within their biological/scientific games? Psychology seems to resign itself to its failure in the search of what has been called character. People appear to define and distinguish themselves not by their character traits but by the situations they find themselves in and by the way they perceive and react to their situations.

Some novels follow such an indirect way of characterizing their protagonists, designing situations that act as catalysts for the understanding of the main characters, who define themselves through extraordinary commitments to, even obsessions with something that takes up all their attention and determines their life situations. It is as if the fullness of the character can only be represented by the absoluteness of its passion for that which fuses emotion and thought, soul and intellect into an extraordinary whole and functions as a kind of mirror or silent dialogue partner for the innermost core. This is for instance the case in Coover’s *Lucky Pierre*, where Pierre is definable only by his sexual organ and his indiscriminate fucking, or in Roth’s *American Pastoral*, where Levrov’s daughter and ultimately he himself are defined irrevocably by her horrifying terror act of killing four people, or in Roth’s *The Human Stain*, where after many disappointments the seventy year-old college professor finds fulfillment in his love for a much younger, uneducated cleaning woman. In Toni Morrison’s novel *Love* the title defines the theme; it is a book where love and hate delineate the coordinates of all that happens. In Richard Powers’s *Plowing the Dark* (2000), it is science and technology that form the horizon of possibilities and impossibilities for a group of virtual-reality researchers; in his *The Time of Our Singing* (2003), music almost excessively determines the lives of the two mixed-blood brothers and their parents. This

commitment to music expands and intensifies to an extent that the characters, especially the lives of the two brothers, almost disappear behind their strong passion for vocal music and the interpretations of the music pieces they sing and play. In this kind of book, the character is defined by both the exclusiveness of its commitment and the object of its fascination, namely love, science/virtuality, art, war, etc. The interaction between the character's commitment and its object creates a theme. To become distinct, theme and character are here more than ever dependant upon one another.

While the postmodern novel strove for aesthetic purity or perfection and shunned the idea of "relevance", the functions of art and literature in post-postmodern times have become varied and contradictory. Literature can be a place of openness and uncertainty and disclose the deficits of the time, or it may be a place to which one can flee with one's longings and anxieties. It may disrupt our expectations and open up existential questions, or it may confirm the familiar things that we expect and like. It may even be just something that provides us with a pleasant Sunday afternoon. Combinations of trends — of character novel and thriller, of analysis and entertainment, of the existential and the comic approach — are the order of the day. Stewart O'Nan's *Halloween* (2003) may serve as a gaudy example of the combinatory scheme. One of the ingredients is the Gothic horror novel, used in a playful spirit. The ghosts of the dead speak to Tim, the sole survivor of a fatal car accident on Halloween, and they function also as narrators, joking and making fun among themselves. The horror novel is combined with the character novel, with loss and grief, guilt and atonement, and traumatized characters obsessed with memories of the crash and the senselessness of death and survival. The book finally adds the thriller-motif of repeating the outing and the grief, in a kind of showdown, in the (here narrated) Halloween night a year later, with Tim rushing the car in the repeated event with fatal inevitability towards another catastrophe, a trip which O'Nan, however, ends with further surprises and only a partial success of the past over the present.

## 10.5. Telling Stories

Though the contemporary market for literature is divided and varied, serving with different types of books a variety of often contradictory interests, what connects all types of novels is the penchant for storytelling. It may well be that the situational vividness of storytelling, which the postmodern authors mostly shunned because of its threatening one-dimensionality or which they multiplied into a “baroque” tangle of plot lines (Barth), is now the contemporary means of controlling the pressure of the indeterminate, the unstructurable and ineffable. It seems that by confirming and giving expression to the psychological insight that the individual self and its outer and inner worlds are structured as stories, the novel in its various forms can establish a common bond by narrative at a time in which the simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous reigns and quite different and mutually exclusive demands are raised. This penchant for storytelling expresses a certain optimism of the authors, their belief in their ability to cope with the uncertainties, the unknowable, and the frightening in human existence, and to interpret what is there together with that which is not there. The impression that a kind of realism with a human face reenters fiction, for instance Franzen’s and Eugenides’s bestsellers, is strengthened by the fact that many novels, with exceptions such as Ellis’s fiction, have conciliatory endings or at least attenuate the negative potential by a comic perspective, by a revival of sensibility, by a moral concern, or by an openness of the future, whatever the final outcome may be, or at least activate the healing spirit of narrative, which the most radical postmodern authors wanted to evade or counterbalance.

Critics like Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes, or Keith Opdahl have distinguished two radically different objectives in literature, which of course interrelate, but not without establishing a dominance relationship between the two. Iser’s and Opdahl’s distinctions between the familiarizing and defamiliarizing tendencies in literature are obviously relevant in our context. In his essay “The Interplay of Creation and Interpretation”, Iser defines “creation” as a transgressive mode; it aims at “an annihilation of our cherished securities, and it tends to become scandalous the more entrenched our stabilities are” (394). It thus tends to change, even destroy the reader’s horizon of expectations, as Iser argued in his reception theory. “Interpretation”,

however, “is basically a cognitive act designed to tackle something non-cognitive or not-yet-cognized/cognizable” (389). The two acts are interdependent. Opdahl uses similar distinctions. In his article “The Nine Lives of of Literary Realism”, he differentiates between two styles that “divide sharply on the means they use”. While some writers “meet the challenge of their era by shocking the reader and breaking expectation: others move even closer to the reader, learning to match not only his world but the very process by which he experiences and and imagines” (4). Opdahl makes it clear that postmodern writers follow the defamiliarizing line and that realists choose the familiarizing, the interpretative way, to use Iser's term, and also that his sympathy lies with the goals of the realists, who “satisfy many human needs, whether it be a celebration of nature or perpetuation of our own likeness or attempt to solve human problems by means of a model”; they furnish “an important element of community, permitting large bodies of forbidden or unarticulated experience to be shared publicly” (Opdahl 3. See also Claviez, Fluck, Leypoldt).

It is obvious that in most cases, even those that flourish the strategies of excess, the realists revive the familiarizing and interpreting tendencies of fiction, striving to further knowledge, a knowledge that includes an acquaintance with the gaps of knowledge, the void, the unexplainable. But the gap and the void, the mysterious and the grotesque in almost all cases do not destroy the ability to know and interpret, and if, as in the case of the Swede in Roth's *The American Pastoral*, the protagonist falls victim to utter despondency over his failing to understand the irreparable overthrow of his familiar world, the narrator establishes a wider and balancing frame of reference that makes the character's despair understandable but also personal. And there is almost always the network of cause and effect, good and bad, the normal and the unnormal, which provide categories of judgment, though, as we have argued, the awareness of uncertainty is always made present by deconstructive strategies. The latter are similar to those of the postmodern writers but scarcely ever attain the absolute and universal meaning they usually have in postmodern fiction, though there are important differences in the postmodern camp too, as we have demonstrated in the earlier chapters of the book. What the realist writer strives for is thus a balance of viewpoints and judgments, while the postmodern writers often looked for the clash

and opposition of perspectives, for the unsynthesizable paradox, and for the provocation and definite break of the horizon of expectations. And yet, there is also in postmodern fiction a search for balance, for control of the gap and the void, which, however, takes quite a different path: not the way of interpretation but, in Iser's term, that of "creation". The means of creation in the postmodern novel is irony and expresses the subjective but absolute control of the author over his material and modes of representation, both of which push against or transgress the limits of expectation and of knowledge.

Ironic discourse is complex, even paradoxical. Its source is the problematic relationship of the speaker to the object of his or her speech. It plays with the discrepancy between them; it is not only target-related but also self-reflexive. In its paradoxical state of double polarity, irony creates a kind of anti-seriousness that is serious. It holds and expresses the whole dimension of anthropological knowledge and curiosity. Irony is a function of realism, as it negates the unreal, clichéd reality; and it is a means of overcoming reality, as it sets against it the power of the subject. It is a sharp tool of awareness that, according to Friedrich Schlegel, "cannot be trifled with by any means". Its language contributes wit, an erotic consciousness, a cosmopolitan interest, and frivolity. It contains the comic perspective as one of its tools. There is also an irony of irony that plays its game when the ironic style and the ironization of pathos are not recognized by the recipient. Irony in the media society has as its targets the false identification of art and reality, of language and the real, of fictionality and truth, the familiar and the unknown, the self and the other. In its deconstructive, literary form, irony almost always has a constructive epistemological function. It becomes very serious and sarcastic when it points from the well-known to the other, to chaos and apocalypse, indeed to what Ionesco called the "fundamental condition" of humanity, the "first" and "simple", but "forgotten" truths, like death and isolation, angst and "existential uneasiness", "the strangeness of the world", calling everything into question. Irony as attitude, as form, as language and rhetoric is one of the foremost means of fulfilling this function. The question is whether the slogan of the British group Pulp, "Irony is over. Bye, bye" is not to be answered with a kind of meta-irony that ironizes the (call for the) end of irony.

Irony is an achievement of knowledge, of narrative knowledge that cannot be lost at this late stage of literary development. And the post-postmodern novel has in fact developed its own kinds of irony, which are not so obvious because they express themselves in structure and perspective, but have their own ways of subverting or rather relativizing simple oppositions. The irony here works not so much in the direction of gaining control over the inexplicable and showing the author's subject as the master of the discourse, though it does that too; rather, it serves the goal of establishing a countermedium against an all-too easy spirit of familiarization. The contemporary storytelling scheme of the realists, for instance, tends to define characters and themes in terms of the extraordinary but places and contains them within the (ordinary) family circle, which then also becomes extraordinary; though as a natural social group, the family keeps its (healing) function as a lasting, even if broken-up, elementary form of cohesion if not unity. The ordinary, the extraordinary, and the organic/elemental here ironically reflect upon one another without arranging simple syntheses. Furthermore, the narrative not only creates the extraordinary beyond and within the ordinary and its family spirit, but intersperses both the normal and the abnormal with gaps, the void, the mysterious, and the atrocities of the grotesque, which, as a result of their interaction with the normal and ordinary, establish ironic relationships. The multimodal perspective of knowledge under these circumstances acquires its own ironic dimension. This does not fully change our assessment of the achievement of the post-postmodern novel, but it explains why it only rarely becomes sentimental and pathetic, the dominance of which qualities makes some of the traditional realism of premodernist times scarcely bearable any longer and against whose simple and uncalled-for familiarization and emotional syntheses modern literature rebelled.

This structuring post-postmodern irony also explains another interesting phenomenon, namely why some of the most prominent contemporary American authors, such as DeLillo, Franzen, Eugenides, Wallace, lately also Powers, and many others have attained a rare (ironic) achievement. As authors they have become three figures in one — namely writers' writers, critics' writers and audience's writers as well — a triangulation which points to the fact that their novels obviously are able to satisfy quite different



expectations and needs. The fact that they contain aesthetic and social/didactic values, as well as aesthetic and entertaining purposes, obviously causes their popular success. This mix of standards makes their fiction more flexible and broader in its appeal but also makes it more difficult to develop criteria of quality. The American culture, Don DeLillo once said, completely absorbs the literary author (an absorption which the postmodern writer tried to prevent with all available means), so that his or her voice does not differ from what he calls the “general blabla”. In fact, parallel to the experts of business, of the Near East, or of health and fitness, the writer, even the prominent writer, increasingly seems to face the danger of becoming an expert of telling stories in a readable, acceptable and useful, or “relevant” manner that is able to hold its own in the market. It is also the market of the media culture, which needs for its programs of entertainment and instruction every striking and familiarizing story it can get.

But the books of the mentioned authors are also the critics’ and the writers’ writers and are praised for their literary value. The question, however, remains: what are now the criteria of literary value? It seems that after the relativization of the modern and postmodern purely aesthetic, formal criteria of quality, literary criticism has not yet found a convincing aesthetic parameter of evaluation that fits the new terms of narrative. Whether one likes it or not, it seems now pertinent to go beyond the formal aesthetic criteria and do justice to the mix of the aesthetic and the social, the affirmative and the negative, and the multimodal perspective in post-postmodern fiction, which makes the novels bestsellers. One should also apply a mix of criteria that would give greater weight to the social and the didactic elements of art, or rather, in Rorty’s terms, raise the value of the novel for the introduction of the reader into the complexities of life. This would not close but rather lessen the gap between the popular and the critical view. It is interesting to note that American literary criticism has often already gone this way, unfortunately simplifying so much their arguments that they don’t help much to delineate rational criteria of quality but rather prevent them by avoiding clearly defined judgments and following the authors’ line, praising their combinational talent, and the variety of effects they see in the book. Richard Powers’s *Plowing the Dark*, for instance, according to a review in *Commonwealth*, “has a surfeit of

intelligence, empathy, playful theory, serious philosophy, loving literary allusions and wit”, which makes the book come “very close to putting into practice a theory of everything a novel can achieve”. The miracle of the American literary scene is that under these confusing circumstances and the rivalry among aesthetic, cultural, and economic standards, remarkable fiction is still being written, that the important novels (of course with exceptions) are generally indeed identified as such, and that there is by and large finally a consensus of which they are.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sukenick says that there are “two ways of going about things: one is to put everything in and the other is to leave everything out” (1975a, 42, quoting John Ashbery). Referring to the exchange between Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe, Elkin says, “I’d rather be a putter-inner than a taker-outer” (LeClair and McCaffery 109).

<sup>2</sup> Barth wrote recently: “I would refresh myself by writing an essay-lecture or two, in order to discover what I thought about some subject or other, before [...] laying the keel for the next substantial fiction project” (Barth 1995, ix).

<sup>3</sup> See Kearney 1988, 261-65. I am indebted to Kearney’s discussion of the postmodern imagination and to some extent follow him in this book.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson writes about the postmodern videotext, but generalizes his conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> See Köhler; Bertens 1986; Best and Kellner 1991.

<sup>6</sup> In the following account of the various positions on postmodernism, I rely on Bertens’s excellent introduction to postmodernism, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (1995), on the material that he makes available, and the ductus of his argument, though for most of the evaluations I am responsible.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard (who started to publish in the Sixties, but had a strong impact on American theory only in the Eighties) and Jameson, influenced by Baudrillard, connected the features of postmodernism, fragmentation, de-centerment, pluralism, i.e., the deconstruction of the essentialist notions of truth, justice, freedom, and reality, to cultural phenomena, and connected these cultural phenomena with the state of consumer society and connected both with the state of late capitalism, and all this under one explanatory scheme, the macro-theory of Marxism (Jameson) or the hypothesis of radical sign control over reality (Baudrillard). Both authors (and other deconstructionists) obviously overshot the mark in their radical one-sidedness. These, in their totalizing, negative view of postmodern society, stimulating theories were followed by more detailed studies of the socio-economic features that were responsible for the transition from modernism to postmodernism. They were not always more favorable to postmodern society but made the picture more complex. An impressive example is David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989). He differentiates, in consensus with other theorists, between a Fordist-Keynesian economic system of accumulation and profit maximization that ruled the rather stable and prosperous postwar area until the economic crisis of 1973, and, after its break-up, “a period of rapid change, flux, and

uncertainty" (124), of "flexible accumulation". It "is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation" (147). The patterns of consumption show a change from the "relatively stable aesthetic of a Fordist modernism" to the postmodern unstable aesthetic that "celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms". Both production and consumption patterns have been subject in the last decades to "an intensive phase of time-space compression (a speeding up of time, a shrinkage of distance, an annihilation of space) that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life"(284). Under these circumstances, it is "hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity", one has "to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values"(291). In spite of his impressively wide-ranging view, and a distinction between a good postmodernism and a bad postmodernism ("a shameless accommodation with the market"), Harvey's verdict about the new flexibility more or less returns to Jameson's mono-causal (negative) view: "Postmodernism then signals nothing more than a logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of production" (62).

One can set against this bleak outlook Bauman's version, who, starting out from the same premise, namely that the economic determines the social, from the standpoint of a postmodern sociology (without the classical models of capitalism, industrialism, rationalization and progress) comes to quite different conclusions, namely that postmodernity is a "modernity emancipated from false consciousness", "a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity had tried hard to *dis-enchant*", a condition that restores "the fullness of moral choice and responsibility" and offers the chance of "self-assembly" in the "habitats" of postmodern culture (Bauman 188, x, xxii, 191).

Harvey's inability or unwillingness to see much good in the new flexibility signal the difficulties that are involved in facing the chances instead of the dangers of this flexibility, which is also a new openness. This openness is a problem because it cannot easily be explained, systematized or controlled; it has, in spite of all similarities, different consequences in the various sectors of society, each of which, as Weber and Habermas and others have noted, develops its own "rationality complex" (Habermas). This means that even if this flexibility and openness has a negative function in the consumption of commodities, which may or may not be the case, a new sensibility may grow in postmodern culture that furthers a new tolerance of the other, and a politics may come to pass that improves a new sense for democracy. The main reason, however, for the uncertainty that the new flexibility and openness create is the problem of legitimation, the legitimation for difference or sameness as value standard, for a moral and political basis for action. The lack of such a legitimation makes it impossible to mediate among the claims of, first, multiplicity and simultaneity, second, enlightenment project and progress, third, universality and wholeness, after the loss or, rather, abandonment of indubitable essentialist truths. Every attempt to answer the crucial questions, the questions about

what is the role of freedom, responsibility, and identity, or of the whole and the part, faces a situation “filled with unsettling contrariety” (Soja 187), with antinomies and paradoxes that cannot be resolved and have to be endured.

Feminism is a good example. In Bertens’s words: “Like the post-Marxists, postmodern feminists find themselves in the position of wishing to preserve Enlightenment ideals, such as freedom and equality, while simultaneously rejecting the universalist assumptions that gave these ideas their original legitimation” (1995, 205). Furthermore, postmodern fragmentation fragments also the feminist agenda. While it first started out with the identity of the white middle-class woman and an essentialist concept of gender, in the process women of color, of different class and various ethnic backgrounds discovered their own difference and de-essentialized and split the cultural and political feminist agenda by adding the social context and the horizon of the group to gender as defining principles. The loss of grand theories characterizes large parts of contemporary feminism. In the words of Fraser and Nicholson: “If postmodern-feminist critique must remain ‘theoretical,’ not just any kind of theory will do. Rather, theory here would be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods [...] Moreover, post-modern feminist theory would be nonuniversalist. When its focus became cross-cultural or trans-epochal its mode of attention would be comparativist rather than universalist, attuned to changes and contrasts instead of ‘covering laws’ [...] It would replace unitary notions of ‘woman’ and ‘feminine gender identity’ with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, land, sexual orientation” (101).

The result of this multiplication of difference is of course conflict, a conflict of legitimate interests that cannot fall back on a legitimate hierarchy of values for solving that conflict. The result of this paralyzing situation is the recourse to Habermas’s communication rationality or Apel’s “discourse ethics”, which are meant to bring about a consensus or, which is more probable, a relapse into power games. We are thus faced with the central paradox that the increase of difference and democracy does not solve problems, only increases the scenes of struggle and action, which, however, paradoxically is an improvement because the “localization” of the conflict, first, favors Lyotard’s “little narratives” at the expense of the “grand narratives” of emancipation and thus opposes the debilitating effect of totality, and, second, in the sense of the deconstructionists, favors the idea of vitalizing struggle and conflict over deadening consensus. Yet problems remain, and these problems are at least threefold. First, the local area ethics can expand into overall ideological positions. Second, all movements for more justice have to choose or negotiate between the moral standards of equality/sameness and otherness/difference. And, third, the mechanisms of power, as Foucault explained, tend to make themselves independent from the subjects that exercise them, become impersonal, establish necessities, and lead to a point where the ethics of freedom can only be explained in terms of resistance against the coercions of power. To sum up this more systematic and associational than chronological, and by no means complete, listing: “Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon 1988, 3). All this makes postmodernism a rather unstable concept but also enables it to react to the change of the times, to keep as it were at the edge of developments, to encompass an

ever widening complex of characteristics up to the point where its aptitude to answer to and designate the needs and drives of the time no longer suffices.

<sup>8</sup> The “system-environment differentiation” is Niklas Luhmann’s term (see 1987, 315; and 1984).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview see Scruton.

<sup>10</sup> In the Introduction to his *Philosophy of Fine Art*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel speaks of art as an unending human enterprise, “to complete which the history of the world will need its evolution of centuries” (122). But then he also notes that art is a “thing of the past”, for “the present time is not [...] favorable to art” (13), the “present time” being a reflective culture.

<sup>11</sup> See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, as Matthew Arnold after him and many of their followers, distinguishes between civilization (“a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence”) and culture or “cultivation” (“the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties which characterize our humanity”) (1972, 33).

<sup>12</sup> Arguing along these lines, Susan Sontag announced a postmodern “new” and “unitary”, i.e., multi-dimensional, noncentered sensibility, a theory of uncritical art that does not combine aesthetic and ethical views, but rests on an “uncompromisingly aesthetic experience of the world”. Instead of “criticism of life” (Matthew Arnold’s definition of art), art should serve the sensual “expansion of life”; she thus spoke of the “erotics” of art, just as Roland Barthes spoke of the “erotics” of reading (1975). Joseph Margolis has claimed that “aesthetics is the most strategically placed philosophic discipline of our time” (1980, 77).

<sup>13</sup> See Nemoianu; Richard Brown; Wechsler; White 1978; Carroll 1987.

<sup>14</sup> The opinions, however, vary because the concepts of aesthetics vary. While Megill emphasizes the aestheticism of the poststructuralists, David Carroll stresses the critical rather than the aesthetic aspect in the role assigned to art and literature by the poststructuralist philosophers (1987, *passim*). Stuart Sim argues, in a more traditional understanding of aesthetics, that the writings of Derrida and Lyotard contain an “anti-aesthetic [...] intent”, aim at “the creation of a post-aesthetic realm beyond the reach of value judgment” (1).

<sup>15</sup> See also Dickie 1974. For the counter-view that an aesthetic attitude or consciousness is necessary for the appreciation of art, see M.C. Beardsley and E. Bullough. For the view that the basic criterion of art status is the author’s intention, see T. Binkley: “To be a piece of art, an item need only be indexed as an artwork by an artist” (37). See also for another variant W.E. Kennick: “If anyone is able to use the word ‘art’ concretely [...] he knows ‘what art is’” (321). Morris Weitz maintains that “the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, make it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties” (“The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” 127).

<sup>16</sup> Speaking of the Object-Theoreticians, Holland refers to “people like W. R. D. Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, Marion Milner or D. W. Winnicott” (301).

<sup>17</sup> Chambers uses the term situation only metaphorically. He intends to undertake “relatively formal and entirely text-based studies of the apparatus — the discursive *dispositifs* — by which [...] texts designate themselves as contractual phenomena” (9). Looking for “textual indices” that serve to identify the text’s “narrative situation”, he negates the difference between the outside and the inside, text and world.

<sup>18</sup> See also Iser 1993, 155-64.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, for instance, holds “that only the correlations between signifier and signifier supply the standard for all research into meaning”, and that, since the unconscious works with signs and symbols, “what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language” (1988, 110, 103).

<sup>20</sup> See also Reid, who advocates the employment of frame-theory because “the perceptions of coherence” (9) are the result from “particular framings” (13) in the communication process and interchange between text and reader, which is a constant struggle between possessing and dispossessing meaning.

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to his essay for the discussion of scripts.

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of the discussion of form and force, see Gibson 32-68.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida in “Force and Signification” uses the force-concept in order to turn against the “regulation and schematization” in “essentialism or teleological structuralism”, “the metaphysics is implicit in all structuralism” (1978, 24). In contrast, force “gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs” (25), and “resists geometrical metaphorization” (20).

<sup>24</sup> See Virilio 1988 and 1991. Docherty in his essay on “The Ethics of Alterity” (1996) uses the same terms — “appearance versus disappearance” — in order to differentiate the paradigm of the postmodern novel from that of the traditional and modern novel (“appearance versus reality”).

<sup>25</sup> See Poster 1988, 7-8; Connor 60; Norris 1990, 172; Best and Kellner 125; and last, but not least, Bertens 1995, 146-159, to whose critical assessment I am indebted.

<sup>26</sup> Gibson’s book is the most recent and most interesting attempt to de-construct and overcome what he calls the “fantasy of a geometrical clarity, symmetry and proportion to narrative or the narrative text” (8), which is promoted by a “narratological geometry or technology of narrative” that “universalise and essentialise the structural phenomena supposedly uncovered” and have their “roots



in structuralism" (5). In a turn away "from laws and regularities", he adopts a model of exchanges and interferences, connections and disconnections, between and within "pluralized spaces". As the title notes, he aims at "a postmodern theory of narrative", which, however, gets entangled in the general rejection of all classifications, categories, and textual invariants, and falls short of establishing a specific postmodern aesthetic by an unspecified "pluralisation of the narratological imaginary", (15) the "notion of narrative parcours" as "movement through multiple spaces" (16) that invalidates "explicatory grids" (Serres), and, in general, he replaces them with ideas like "force, hymen, inauguration, event, monstrosity, laterality, writing" (25), following a strategy that is "nomadic" (25). The usefulness of the book for our purpose, however, is limited by the facts that it does not say what kind of postmodern narrative he has in mind and that none of the established postmodern texts are referred to, much less analyzed, with the exception of Robbe-Grillet. Yet I am indebted to Gibson's lucid and competent overview over the development of narratology, and especially to his analysis of the postmodern ideas of time, event, and monstrosity.

<sup>27</sup> Hawkes said in an interview: "My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly they're elaborately structured. I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. And structure — verbal and psychological coherence — is still my largest concern as a writer. Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of my writing" (Dembo and Pondrom 11).

<sup>28</sup> The thematic structure has been made a special field for analysis by, among others, Levin and Falk. See for an overview Sollors. The evaluation of the thematic approach has radically changed as a result of the power of force in postmodern narrative practice and poststructuralist theory, which rejects the suggestion of centrality and binarism that is almost inevitably inherent in the abstractions of thematization, even the "modest" ones. According to Derrida, "the open and productive displacement of the textual chain", the producing of "a nonfinite number of semantic effects", and the "irreducible and *generative* multiplicity" of the text, the "dissemination" of meaning, in fact "fracture the limit of the text, forbidding an exhaustive and closed formalization of it, or at least a saturating taxonomy of its themes, its signified, its meaning" (1981, 45).

<sup>29</sup> This seems to justify statements like Robert Scholes's that "interpretation proper" is the "thematizing [of] a fictional text", which leads to the establishment of the "binary oppositions that interpretation seeks to reveal as the axes of value in a text", with "the singular oppositions of the text" then leading to "the generalized oppositions that structure our cultural systems of values" (1985, 29, 53, 33). Being disinclined to "the kind of binary reasoning underlying much thematic criticism", one can also be more modest, "drawing a circle around the thematic functions of characters", and seeing thematic assertions as rising gradually from "the temporal process", (Phelan 217, 61, 75) from the dynamic interplay of many particulars, and thus avoiding "thematization" as a totalizing approach.

<sup>30</sup> Symbolic signification in literature is to be distinguished from the general signifying activity of perception and apperception, which is intentional (Brentano 124-25), defined by the meaning-giving acts of consciousness (Husserl 1928, 372; 1980a) and by the operational structure of the mind (Piaget 1967, 3-5, 124-25). The intentional act of the mind has been seen by Cassirer, Whitehead, and Susan Langer as a “symbolic”, i.e., representing act (Cassirer 1953-57; Whitehead 1985). The literary symbol moreover is to be differentiated from the linguistic sign that Peirce and Jakobson called a symbol. The linguistic sign is the medium of all literary signifying, but the literary symbol refers to a secondary level of interpretation. In this, of course, it is not different from the general interpretative function of art, which has been considered symbolic in general terms. The literary symbol as a separate isolatable entity, however, serves a specific function within the overall symbolic pattern of the text by referring, in concrete terms and in a specific way, from something particular to something more general. A further problem is the naming of this specific interpretative reference. Symbol, allegory, and even myth are terms often used without distinction. As Philip Rahv noticed early on, there is a disillusionary confusion of terms: “The younger critics have taken to using all three terms [mythic, symbolic, allegoric] almost interchangeably and always with an air of offering an irrefutable proof of sensibility, with the result that they have been nearly emptied of specific meaning and turned into little more than pretentious counters of approbation” (281). See, for instance, Northrop Frye’s differing, disparate use of the term myth and the equating of myth and symbol for the figurative use of “image” in the sense of symbol. This has not changed much except that after the “linguistic turn” the term metaphor has been added (of which more later).

<sup>31</sup> The literary symbol calls for some further interpretation. We will stick to the term, though in some recent discourses allegory has been substituted for symbol. The fact that the process of embodying figurative meaning in the corporeal entities of a fictive world is arbitrary and willful, manipulated by the writer or character and not restricted to the representation of meaning inherent, for instance, in nature, has led in some commentaries to a preference for the term “allegory” over the term “symbol”, which is supposedly “organic” in character. The symbol allegedly implicates a pre-established, integrative, atemporal and universal relationship between “vehicle” and “tenor”, sign and referent, the material and the spiritual modes of being, thus referring, in the wake of romanticism, to a “natural”, preformed interrelation of surface and depth, of existence and *essence*, while according to the deconstructionist stance of postmodern theoreticians and writers there is no antecedent reality and meaning since language is the limit, so that the symbol is a linguistic construct of the mind without referent outside language.

According to Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Baroque allegory in his *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, allegory is supposed to mark not the presence of an essence in existence as the symbol is supposed to do but, on the contrary, the absence of transcendent meaning, together with the presence of the existential desire to constitute existence into essence, which is *not* present in the given. According to Benjamin, in allegorical thinking, “the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask” (1977b, 214). Thus allegory is considered not only a rhetorical technique but an experience

as well, the experience of the absence of and the reaching out for an ultimate referent, though there is a discontinuous relationship between the material signifier and the spiritual signified. Paul DeMan in his *Allegories of Reading*, maintains that “[a]llegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives [...] tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference of degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading” (205).

Yet the above-mentioned narrowing of the symbol to the expression of metaphysical meaning is as willful and arbitrary as making allegory the expression of the lack of that meaning and the desire for it. Though romanticism proceeds from the assumption that something higher, an ideal or an idea, can manifest itself in nature and the world, in the sense of Carlyle’s dictum: “In the Symbol proper [...] there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite” (*Sar* 165), the symbol reveals also finite meaning. The metaphysical way of symbolic thinking is a result of the Medieval Christian worldview, the concept of the “Chain of Being”, with its graded hierarchy of positions between the material world and God, and the analogies between the physical, the moral, and the spiritual. This kind of symbolic attitude has been “secularized” by denoting and connoting in the symbol not only “vertical” meaning, depth under the surface, spirit above the earth, in short, the ultimate in the relative, but also by providing reference “horizontally”. Symbolic figuration accumulates in the narrative process and connects the milieu with the character, space with time, the house with history. Under the aspect of *function*, the symbol “works both from the individual toward the universal and from the object of less interest to the object of greater interest, from the artificial to the natural, from the outer to the inner, from the physical to the psychological, the spiritual, and the transcendent” (Wimsatt 13). Using the term “symbol”, it is much easier to compare the strategies of modern with those of postmodern fiction.

<sup>32</sup> Kristeva 1984, 25-26, *passim*; in part, she sees the privileged nature of literature in the fact that its “essential element” is the interrelation and interaction of semiotic activity and symbolic formations.

<sup>33</sup> For these terms of differentiation, see R. M. Brown.

<sup>34</sup> In the “Introduction” to *Philosophie in Literatur*, the editors Schildknecht and Teichert differentiate between the first three relationships here proposed. I am indebted to their classification. See also Griffiths; Cascardi 1987.

<sup>35</sup> See also Earl’s approach to *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a “philosophical novel”. He uses the ideas of Norman O. Brown, Lévi-Strauss, Husserl and Heidegger as “commentary on Pynchon’s theme”.

<sup>36</sup> See W. McConnell; Berressem 2006; Foucault’s “The Eye of Power” (who “sees power as an anonymous ‘technology’ [cf. Nietzsche] [...] a global network of infinitely complex and ramose power relations into which the subject is

inscribed" [1980, 151]) presides for long stretches over the poetics of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

<sup>37</sup> Such passages range in length from short references ("In the end one experiences only oneself, Nietzsche said", in "A Shower of Gold" [SS<sup>t</sup> 17]), to statements "Like Pascal said: 'The natural misfortune of our mortal and feeble condition is so wretched that when we consider it closely, nothing can console us'" ("A Shower of Gold" [18]), to a quote from Husserl, "[b]ut you have not grasped the tiring reality, the essence!" the narrator sadly adding, "Nor will I, ever". ("Florence Green is 81" [ ]), to a paragraph-long parody on Heidegger's concept of Being ("Nothing: A Preliminary Account" [SS<sup>t</sup> 247]), to finally an even lengthier treatise on the subject of irony in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" (CL 81-93).

<sup>38</sup> Important contributions to a definition of meta-fiction are reprinted in this volume.

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, however, is ambivalent on this point.

<sup>40</sup> Plater devotes a whole chapter to Wittgenstein's influence on Pynchon, without being always convincing in his far-reaching conclusions.

<sup>41</sup> See for an overview the chapter "Modernism, Existentialism, Post-modernism: The 1970s" in Bertens 1995. I am indebted to his argument.

<sup>42</sup> Art's claim to establishing its own rules and forming a stable structure of continuity and coherence, of a meaning-giving whole in the face of an instable and discontinuous, incoherent and meaningless world was confronted with two problems: the stereotyping of its own innovative forms and the loss of contact with life. Both dangers led to consequences that broke up the unity of the modern movement. The ideology of the new compelled the artist to create ever novel formal syntheses, an effort that finally defeated itself and ultimately worked towards the incorporation of the non-aesthetic into the aesthetic. The experiments of what one might call the progressive avantgarde broke away from the totalizing ideology of most of the "classical" modernists, extended the borderlines of the art system towards the untried and unknown, gave up on the concept of organic form, and blurred the boundaries between art and the social environment (Bürger).

Dadaism is the best example of the crucial tensions within modern art. But modernism as an art movement itself had to follow the law of entropy. By going all the way towards rejecting society and its clichés of perception, thought, and values, by de-contextualizing and de-conceptualizing the text, art must continuously disrupt anew "older" aesthetics and its values, and finally turn against itself, rejecting and breaking up the tenets and practices of the aesthetics of essence and structural totality in its search for both newness and relevance. This point is finally reached in postmodernism. In this dialectical process of establishing and breaking up wholeness which remains without synthesis, the anti-aesthetic within art paradoxically seizes the subversive function of the aesthetic after the aesthetic has lost its spirit of deconstruction and has isolated itself in its hermetics of form. The contradictions in the program of modern art are thus obvious.

Modernism, on the one hand, gives dominance to the universally true and the stability of a clearly bounded form, and aims at the integration of all parts into an objective, totalizing, meaning-giving whole. On the other, it focuses on the particular and the concrete, gives expression to (decentering) subjectivity, reveals and exhibits the transitoriness and elusiveness of experience and knowledge, and invades the unknowable (though the latter can by no means be represented by any kind of wholeness, which in one way or another also means closure). The simultaneous effort to attain closure *and* openness, of course, is an impossibility. Postmodernism has exposed the discrepancy in modern aesthetic ideology, which is the encapsulation of the unbounded within the discipline of form. It has given up the attempt to attain (organic) totality in theme and form and has resigned itself to partiality and unending fluidity, to a paradoxical transformation of form into formed unform that in its radical openness modernism would have considered anti-aesthetic.

<sup>43</sup> It is interesting that the aesthetics of the environment also develop in a paradoxical manner. The overall *functions* of environmental aesthetics incorporated, for instance, in museum culture, decoration, and formulaic fiction, are manifold; this aesthetic wavers between cognition and entertainment, emphasizing the latter, but hardly ever excluding the former. Both cognition and entertainment combine to avoid entropy in a society that has more and more leisure, where entropy equates to boredom. Boredom results from the loss of variety, surprise, struggle, and emotional intensity, from the confrontation with stale repetition and sameness. It goes hand in hand with the standardization of the environment. The struggle against boredom reveals the central paradox of the aesthetics of the environment: the ineluctable interrelation of *sameness* and *difference*, *seeming* and *being*. It is a paradoxical fact that the aesthetics of the environment, i.e., decoration, museum artifacts, popular literature, film and TV series, aim at the production of difference, suspense, and intensity, while at the same time they recur to the sameness of formulaic designs. Even more paradoxical (and mostly neglected in reception aesthetics) is the fact that this sameness of the formula is still able to produce concrete situations of difference, suspense, and intensity.

<sup>44</sup> Todorov notes: "The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary" (1975, 25). See also Caillois 1987: "Le fantastique suppose la solidité du monde réel, mais pour mieux le ravager" (17). Rabkin characterizes 'fantasy' as the "polar opposite [to] Reality" (227).

<sup>45</sup> None of the books on the Fantastic really defines the basic terms, i.e. reality, imagination, play, fantasy in contrast to the fantastic as category, subversion contra expansion, etc.; there is no commonly accepted definition of the fantastic. Each author hedges his or her specific unspecified terms. Swinfen holds that "[t]he essential ingredient of all fantasy is 'the marvellous,' which will be regarded as anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world" (5); Attebery circumvents the whole issue of the fantastic and defines his approach with the following question: "How did the author move his story out of the everyday world into the realm of the marvelous?" (viii). Irwin considers as fantastic "a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility" (4); Manlove says that the fantastic contains a substantial and irreducible

element of “supernatural or impossible worlds, beings, or objects” (3); Rabkin thinks that “[t]he truly fantastic occurs when the ground rules of the narrative are forced to make a 180° reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted” (12). But in Kafka and postmodern texts, the ground rules are not reversed; on the contrary they continue from beginning to end in terms of radical strangeness that in postmodern narrative is not a sign of alienation but of expansion of possibilities. Hume means by fantasy the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and “normal” (K. Hume xii); Brooke-Rose concerns herself primarily with questions of “rhetoric”. Her chapter on the postmodern novel, “Metafiction and Surfiction”, chiefly analyzes “parody” and “stylization” (181). See also Jackson; Schlobin; and the volumes on the state of the Fantastic, containing selected essays from the fourteen International Conferences on the Fantastic, 1978-1994, published 1980-1995 by Greenwood Press, Westport, CO (Coyle; Langford; Morse, Tymn and Bertha; Ruddick).

<sup>46</sup> Critics arrive at genre definitions by cataloguing such characteristic motifs as “pacts with the devil, ... a soul in distress, ... the ghost, the appearance of personified death among the living, ... the undefinable, invisible ‘thing’, ... vampires, the statue, the doll, the suits of armor or the automation that suddenly come to life” (Caillois 1974, 63-65; see also Gradmann 132-33). Other theorists insist that fantastic literature must arouse fear, but fear varies according to the expectations and predispositions of the recipient (see Lovecraft 101); see also: Caillois 1965; H. Conrad). Attempts have been made at defining the fantastic by means of opposition to some posited extra-linguistic “reality” (Caillois 1965; Jaquemin, “Über das Phantastische in der Literatur;” Gradmann 8), though the “reality” status of the fictional world can only be defined by the text itself. Post-Freudian, psychoanalytically oriented criticism frequently simplifies the phenomenon of the fantastic by taking it one-dimensionally as a compensation for too much rationality or for a guilt complex or as a violation of taboos — this almost always fails to account for any specifically literary dimension (Penzoldt xii; Vax; Caillois 1987, 30; Kittler). Sociological modes of argumentation often merely deplore the alleged escapism and lack of social relevance of fantastic literature and attack it for its “reactionary moral attitude” and for representing the human being as determined by unfathomable external forces (Gustafsson, “Über das Phantastische in der Literatur” (1970); Baier; E. Wilson).

<sup>47</sup> Caillois notes: “The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality” (1965); Castex writes: “The fantastic [...] is characterized [...] by a brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life”; Vax, in *L’art et la littérature fantastique*: “The fantastic narrative generally describes men like ourselves, inhabiting the real world, suddenly confronted by the inexplicable” (all quotations in Todorov 1975, 26).

<sup>48</sup> A critical discussion of Todorov’s model of the fantastic is to be found in Brooke-Rose 1981, 55-71. Jackson rephrases Todorov’s model, suggesting a fantastic mode rather than a genre; she understands fantasy as a mode of discourse. At one pole of the scale is the marvellous, at the other the mimetic (Todorov’s uncanny), between which the fantastic with varying relations of dominance is

situated (33-37). She extends Todorov's "*poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms" (6), and makes reference to psychoanalytic readings of texts. As to the mimetic role of her model, even in her reference to postmodern texts, for instance those of Pynchon, it is still defined by the assumption that the world is coherent, structured, and accessible to human understanding, and leaves out of consideration the blurring of the borderlines in postmodern fiction. L. Olsen follows Jackson, noting that "fantasy is that stutter between two modes of discourse which generates textual instability, an ellipse of uncertainty" (19), an approach rather undifferentiated for the analysis of postmodern fiction. The choice of texts is furthermore rather arbitrary. Without explanation the book refers to Kafka, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Fuentes, Pynchon, García Márquez, and Coetzee.

<sup>49</sup> Sartre's philosophical distinction between the *thetic* and the *non-thetic* can be helpful for defining the structure of the fantastic. The *thetic* denotes propositions taken to be rational, real, essential, while the *non-thetic* refers to their opposites, which are unreal and can have no adequate form and linguistic expression (Bessière). Gombrich's concept of *schema and correction* (of order) is still nearer to the structure of the fantastic in the text. If the schema fulfills our need for form, for a "basic scaffolding" "with which to grasp the infinite variety of this world of change" and demonstrates the "tendency of our minds to classify and register our experiences in terms of the known" (24, 99; see also Iser 1978, 227) in an effort to reduce the contingency of the world, then the discovery that the ordering schemata cannot handle the growing complexity of the world, as well as the force of desire and change must lead to a correction that can range from a violation of norms to their total invalidation. The fantastic always served this function of correcting the schema, of rejecting the stabilized and stereotyped old for something other and new. Since the deformations of the schema presuppose the presence of the schema, which can be pushed into the background or relegated to the response of the reader but never abolished, there is always a background-foreground relationship between the fantastic, which violates the schema, and the schema itself and its ordering impetus that establishes it. The relationship is variable in the sense that what is background can become foreground and vice versa. This process may repeat itself, reversing, contradicting and complicating the picture of the world in what Arnheim has called a "mutual bombardment", in this case of order and disorder or form and force (226). In this process the fantastic marks the deficiencies of the schema, its weak points, and can contribute, in Freud's words, to a "cognizance of what has been displaced" (1968b, 15).

<sup>50</sup> Sukenick refers to Roth's statement and adds to it his own version: "In a curious turnabout, writers in the seventies [...] have learned to profit from what is by definition an impossible situation. If everything is impossible, then anything becomes possible. What we have now is a fiction of the impossible that thrives on its own impossibility, which is no more nor less impossible these days than, say, city life, politics, or peace between the sexes. To paraphrase Beckett, it can't go on it must go on it goes on" (1975a, 8).

<sup>51</sup> Freud 1953 and 1968a, *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> The argument here follows that of Metzner, though the conclusions are my own.

<sup>53</sup> Bakhtin sees a subversive function, a “dialogical” structure (questioning, simple or unitary ways of observing the world) in the fantastic mode of such authors as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Poe, Jean Paul, and relates these traits to Menippean satire. The latter’s characteristics are “violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of event and of the established norms of behaviour and etiquette” (96). “The fantastic serves here not in the positive *embodiment* of the truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation, and, most importantly, its *testing*” (94).

<sup>54</sup> Magic realism has been considered, on the one hand, a literary mode, a form of the fantastic in extension of European paradigms, for instance Kafka, under the influence of the French surrealists, a development that announces the arrival of Latin American Literature as innovative fiction in the international canon (Flores). Against this obviously restricted interpretation later versions have conceptualized magic realism as an “attitude” towards reality that focuses on the “discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances” (Leal 122), in opposition to the paradigms of universal reason that would limit and impoverish human perception and understanding. While Flores sees an advantage in working strictly in terms of the fantastic, Leal, whose interest is more epistemological than aesthetic, starts out with a much too narrow concept of the fantastic and, contrary to Flores, maintains that “magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that Ortega describes”. Magical realism “does not need to justify the mystery of events, as the fantastic writer has to. In fantastic literature the supernatural invades a world ruled by reason” (Leal 121, 123).

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Alejo Carpentier, who opposes European models though he is heavily influenced by European surrealism and admits it. He turns against this European “school” of surrealism by calling it much too literary (see 1995a and 1995b).

<sup>56</sup> Writers of magic realism give the impression that they have corrected the limitations of the realistic novel and created the adequate literary form for the representation of the really real in the Latin American condition and the history of the Continent. Out of this dilemma has risen the feeling with some of the critics that “there is undoubtedly something unsatisfactory about the strategy of magic realism [...]. Supplementation (magic, in this instance) only adds another layer to the significative deception. The *thing itself* always slips away” (Simpkins 154, see also Jameson 1975b, 142). This dilemma explains that Borges and Márquez both have gone beyond this notion of magic realism as a magic supplementation of realism, stressing the non-referential, making in fact the problem of representation a focal point of the text, which indeed *One Hundred Years of Solitude* does in its play with the problem of textuality. Both writers became disillusioned with the “tricks” and subjects of magic realism. Borges said “that I feel as if I were a kind of high fidelity, a kind of gadget, no? A kind of factory producing stories about mistaken identity,



about mazes, about tigers, about mirrors”; and Márquez devalued — in comparison with his *The Autumn of the Patriarch* — the success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* “since I knew it was written with all the tricks and artifices under the sun, I knew I could do better even before I wrote it” (see Simpkins 155-56 for the quotation of the full text).

<sup>57</sup> See for even more names Faris. See also Todd.

<sup>58</sup> D’Haen cites Hutcheon 1988 and McHale as examples.

<sup>59</sup> Bloom has offered a formula that indicates this plurisignification of the fantastic, which a narrowly psychoanalytic interpretation often denies: “*fantasy, as a belated version of romance, promises an absolute freedom from belatedness, from the anxieties of literary influence and origination, yet this promise is shadowed always by a psychic over-determination in the form itself of fantasy, that puts the stance of freedom into severe question. What promises to be the least anxious of literary modes becomes much the most anxious*” (6, Bloom’s italics).

<sup>60</sup> Kennard’s distinction between two types of fantasy, number and nightmare, exemplifies how limited the definitions of the fantastic in postmodern fiction are. Number (Heller, Barth, Vonnegut) is dehumanist in orientation; it is “anti-literature, anti-myth, destructive of form”, and it “takes the reader systematically and logically towards nothing, towards the void, by breaking down one by one his expectations of realism”. Nightmare on the contrary is humanist in orientation; it is “basically a constructionist form”, and it moves “the reader towards a recognition of an all-inclusive world, a puzzle in which the pieces fit together [...] towards infinity where there is mystery rather than the void” (12-14). In fact, the tension between what he calls number and nightmare is characteristic of the postmodern fantastic. Generally, the definitions of the fantastic are either too vague to be heuristically helpful or they are too rigorously separative. The central feature of the postmodern fantastic is its radical ambivalence, the paradoxical interface of contradictory possibilities.

<sup>61</sup> Abstraction of course is not an entirely new phenomenon. According to David Hume’s well-known differentiation, modern art moves from the “vital”, the closely bound-up-with-nature, towards the “geometrical” with its “tendency to abstraction” and “its feeling of separation in the face of outside nature” (cf. 1967). Georg Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* — both following and expanding on Hegel — called the totality of the novel abstract, contrary to that of the epic, and described its dangers: “In a novel, totality can be systematized only in abstract terms, which is why [...] the only possible form of a rounded totality — had to be one of abstract concepts [...]. Such abstract systematization is, it is true, the ultimate basis of the entire structure, but in the created reality of the novel all that becomes visible is the distance separating the systematization from concrete life: a systematization which emphasizes the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subjective one. Thus the elements of the novel are, in the Hegelian sense, entirely abstract; abstract, the nostalgia of the characters for utopian perfection, a nostalgia that feels itself and its desire to be the only true reality; abstract, the existence of

social structures based only upon their factual presence and their sheer ability to continue; abstract, finally, the form-giving intention which, instead of surmounting the distance between these two abstract groups of elements, allows it to subsist, which does not even attempt to surmount it but renders it sensuous as the lived experience of the novel's characters, uses it as a means of connecting the two groups and so turns it into an instrument of composition. We have already recognized the dangers that arise from the fundamentally abstract nature of the novel: the risk of overlapping into lyricism or drama, the risk of narrowing reality so that the work becomes an idyll, the risk of sinking to the level of mere entertainment literature. These dangers can be resisted only by positing the fragile and incomplete nature of the world as ultimate reality: by recognizing, consciously and consistently, everything that points outside and beyond the confines of the world" (70-71).

To be sure, the tendency, especially in the English novel, for instance with Joyce, went in the direction of making visible "the fragile and incomplete nature of the world as ultimate reality", but the aim was to draw again together the "fragile" and "incomplete" into wholeness, the unity of the subjective consciousness. Yet this double coding causes problems. Henry James combines the double goal of fragility and unity of character with the strategy of "positing a character as the controlling observer, to supersede the author's vision and check his interventions" (M. Friedman 61), which, however, has the consequence that the consciousness selected by James "as a controlling observer", takes on "a splendid isolation", becomes a kind of abstraction in spite of the social context it is placed in. Dorothy Richardson's failure in her novel *Pilgrimage* results from the fact that she creates the consciousness of her heroine as abstraction, where "there is no drama, no situation, no set scene", where "[n]othing happens" (Sinclair 57-58), where no beginning and no end is recognizable. Virginia Woolf therefore notes that the task of the novelist is "[to] trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (1966-67, II, 107). In order to counter the tendency towards abstraction, Woolf's whole endeavor is to saturate the stream of consciousness with outer, sensory details that function as stimuli and as (symbolic) concretizations of feeling and thought — an effort that, however, does not invalidate Lukács's objection ("a nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality").

<sup>62</sup> Abstraction in the novel does not serve, as it does in painting, to find a new basis for ordering reality. Wilhelm Worringer argued in his influential book *Abstraction and Empathy* (which appeared 1908, at the beginning of cubism) that in the visual arts, "the primal artistic impulse" ("Urkunsttrieb") searches for pure abstraction as the only "possibility of repose within the confusion and obscurity of the world picture" (81, my translation); and Kandinsky wrote a famous treatise about the spirituality of abstract art, *The Spiritual in Art*, stating that the goal of abstract art was the purification of the spiritual. Abstraction in literature, at least in the mentioned cases, is concerned not with the gain of the really real, the essence behind the surface, but with the *loss* or even negation of reality, or better, of the concept of reality, in the sense of Sukenick's statement: "The contemporary writer — the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part — is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist" (DN 41). One of the consequences of abstraction is the metamorphosis of characters like

Burlingame in Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, who plays with masks in a series of personal metamorphoses that make him take on the personality of many other figures and appear at various places at the same time, thus personifying Barth's conviction that "the same life lends itself to any number of stories" (*FO* 4). Ironically enough, Burlingame can find his identity only in the dialectic of abstraction/concretization, by becoming a "blank", disappearing from the scene, or, according to one rumor, finally staying with his Indian ancestors.

<sup>63</sup> The loss of the "objective" sum total, of a value system, leads to what Bartheleme calls the "trash phenomenon", which we will discuss later on in more detail. The proliferation of trash could lead to the "'endless' quality" and "sludge quality" of the "filling" and "stuffing" (*SW* 96) of the situation in the text: "We like books that have a lot of *dreck* in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on. This 'sense' is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves — looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having 'completed' them" (*SW* 106). Trash itself is an abstraction from values and a negation of systems of differentiation, which the human being as a "meaning-craving animal" (Berger) is bound to create. The "trash phenomenon" elevates sameness, while judgmental appraisal would identify difference. Together with the word "dreck", the notion of "filling" is important in this quotation. The "filling" of the situation with "dreck" implies an abstraction, formalization, and contingency of sense and meaning; and, consequently, the reading process attains the same kind of abstraction. The reading of the text is not meant and obviously not able to arrive "at a feeling of satisfaction" but has to be satisfied with "having 'completed'" the lines, i.e., with the mechanical/abstract constitution of the text. This abstraction comes to pass because not only "objectivity" but also "subjectivity" lose their potential of meaning.

<sup>64</sup> The representation of "cosmopsis", which besets many of Barth's protagonists and makes them unable to act and feel in accordance with the given situation, is a new state of representing consciousness, a new form of abstraction. As Malcolm Bradbury argues, this abstraction no longer results, from naturalism and its milieu-theories that, by making the milieu the determining factor, decentralize the human being, or from impressionism as an attitude of "aesthetic hyper-awareness" (1979, 191). It does not originate from the abandonment of the balance between the outer and the inner in the representation of character and from the shifting of the reality-coordinates either towards the outer or the inner world; rather, it evolves rather from doubts about the nature of "reality" itself. We live in a world where "reality becomes slighter and more familiar, it fits within a style, it does not outrun language" (Barthes 1968, 114; 1974, 54), to the exclusion of surprise, the unknown, the incommensurable, which, however, loom in the background, or, as Nabokov wrote in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941): "Men have learned to live with a black burden, a huge aching hump: the supposition that 'reality' may be only a 'dream.' How much more dreadful it would be if the very awareness of your being aware of reality's dream-like nature were also a dream, a built-in hallucination" (39).

<sup>65</sup> For details, see my essay “The Absurd and its Forms of Reduction in Postmodern American Fiction”.

<sup>66</sup> For Jac Tharpe, cosmopsis is a “transcendentalism”, a mystical “view of the whole” (27).

<sup>67</sup> The figures of Barth’s stories often underlie or succumb to the abstracting law of metamorphosis, are subjects in a plot they cannot control; they become constellations or documents; they are mere fictions and also the narrators or authors of these very fictions. Standing between patterns, which they fulfill or imitate, they disintegrate more or less into roles according to the dictates of the situation, while their actions decompose into non-actions, at best situationally controlled episodes. Myths and legends offer tractable material because they are no longer artful interpretations of the historical world but, once more abstracted, artful interpretations of interpretations of the world, which, again once more abstracted, can be “illuminated” and “echoed” as patterns — to use Barth’s terms — in the parodic and comic modes.

<sup>68</sup> Barth himself states: “The structure [...] is the structure of the logarithmic spiral [...]: the Fibonacci series of numbers as it manifests itself in the logarithmic spiral. The logarithmic spiral is one that expands exponentially and it occurs all over nature. I was interested in the fact that if you unwind certain marine mollusks like the chambered nautilus, for example, which unwinds in a logarithmic spiral, and keep unwinding the spiral in that same ratio, it takes on the shape of some of the great spiral galaxies, like the galaxy M-33 in Andromeda, which is part of the Perseus series of constellations”. He goes on to say: “[I]n the three *Chimera* novellas each novella happens to be about 1.6. times the size of the preceding novella because that’s the Fibonacci series, the golden ratio” (McKenzie 137, 151).

<sup>69</sup> “Stenciling” is defined as a “process by which you can produce patterns and designs” (Tanner 1971, 164). <sup>70</sup> This passage appears in the section titled “The Masturbatory Gesture”.

<sup>71</sup> The three examples are listed in Malmgren 172.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Federman’s statement: “above all, all forms of duality will be negated — especially duality: that double-headed monster which, for centuries now, has subjected us to a system of values, an ethical and aesthetical system based on the principles of good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly” (“Surfiction” 8).

<sup>73</sup> See Jakobson 1966.

<sup>74</sup> See also Kestner, a collection of essays has focused on Frank’s concept of spatial form: Smitten and Daghistani.

<sup>75</sup> In the attempt to emphasize the gap between language and reality and to stress the immanent structure of fiction, literary criticism has further abstracted the

use of the term “spatial”, speaking of the compositional fictional space that has to be filled, structured, and given meaning. The term “space” in this case is only used metaphorically. It does not refer to semantic space and only coincidentally to “spatial” organization, and thus appears to lose its heuristic value. In a book like Malmgren’s *Fictional Space*, the reference is only to “text space”. The term is used for “discursive space”, “textual space”, or “compositional space”, for “alphabetical space”, “lexical space” available to the fictionist for “expenditure of and experimentation with, narrative energies”, or for “the space ‘occupied’ by the reader” (51, 50, 173, 176, 51). In fact, there are scarcely any representative studies of space, in the semantic sense, in the postmodern novel. By paying almost exclusive attention to the rejection of mimesis in postmodern fiction or to metafictional discourses, critics have neglected the facts that postmodern fiction still creates worlds, that its worlds are still situationally structured, and that each situation contains the element of space, however it is manifested. In the following, space will generally be used in its literal sense, the term “spatial” also in the abstracted meaning of simultaneity and cross-reference, in contrast to “sequential”.

<sup>76</sup> See Mendilow; Meyerhoff; Noon; Church; Bradbury 1979. See also Drechsel Tobin; Medina; Patrides; and Segre.

<sup>77</sup> The conviction that all human notions of time are *conceptual* and *constructionist* is based on what has been called by Dilthey the hermeneutic circle, the problematics of the relationship between the particular and the general, the impossibility *and* the necessity to abstract from the specific the nonspecific, the conceptual.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Rösen; Nietzsche had already differentiated three of the mentioned types of historiography; Koselleck. For an overview of postmodern positions on history, see Kunow 1989.

<sup>79</sup> For a general overview see Uhlig. I rely on some of his material, though not on his argument which stresses the position of the past.

<sup>80</sup> According to Hayden White, not only literature but also historiography use a number of literary metaphors for the structuring of the past, such as romance, comedy, tragedy, irony (1974; cf. also 1985). White takes the categories from Frye. For a balanced evaluation of the relation between historiography and fiction, see Hutcheon 1989. Contrary positions emphasize the difference between historiography and fiction. They accentuate the fact that fiction gives a subjective view of events and treats historical figures not as objects, but as subjects (Hamburger 113-14); fiction need not furnish proofs for its statements and has a specific character in the constructive “logic” of its assertions; it suspends disbelief on the reception side. For criticism of White’s position see Dray; Golob; Mandelbaum; LaCapra.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Raleigh 43-55, 126-36; Buckley.

<sup>82</sup> See D’haen and Bertens 9-31; Irmer; Wesseling; Bennett; Chénétier; Engler; Rüdiger Kunow 1989; Attridge; Lenz et al.; R. Martin; Thiher 1990.

<sup>83</sup> For more details, see Kunow 1990.

<sup>84</sup> For the historic details and their treatment in *The Sot-Weed Factor* cf. — in addition to the books on Barth cited — Diser; Holder; Weixlmann; Ewell.

<sup>85</sup> See Krafft; Weinberger.

<sup>86</sup> History-bashing continues in Pynchon's other texts. In *Vineland* somebody says that history "is no more worthy of respect than the average movie script, and it comes about in the same way — soon as there is one version of a story, suddenly it's anybody's pigeon. Parties you never heard of get to come in and change it" (81). In his latest novel, *Mason & Dixon*, though it is set in the "Age of Reason" (27), one of the characters says: "Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerced, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power [...] She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiterers" (350). This deconstructive/reconstructive view takes on a more serious note in the Rev'd Wicks Cherrycoke's statement from his *Christ and History*, used as an epigram for chapter 35: "History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers, — nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other", it is "not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,— rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common" (349). Time is struggle and movement: "Down here, the Rivalry with France, keen as ever, — out There, the Timeless, ev'rything upon the Move, no pattern ever to repeat itself" (209). "In America [...] Time is the true River that runs 'round Hell" (334); quite generally, "Time is the Space that may not be seen" (326), and history appears as a "Calling Into a Void" (179), "revealing nothing, as it absorbs everything" (179). The choices are "Disciplin'd Rage for Jesus" or "that Escape into the Void, which is the very Asian Mystery" (288) - or, in postmodern times, the filling of the void with inventions.

<sup>87</sup> See also Seed 36. The concept of plot has a long history. The Russian formalists differentiated "story", which contains a mere sequence of actions and events, from "plot": Both include the same events, but in the plot the events *are arranged* and connected according to an orderly sequence". (Ehrlich 57, 58, 67-68, 116. See also Jakobson 1971.) Modern anthropology and semiotics, for instance in the theory of Eco (1989, 203, 206), blur the difference between plot and story because they do not believe, like the Formalists, that "plot constitutes the specific peculiarity of art" (Ehrlich 67), but think that plot belongs to life itself and that the reader "only recognizes life as real if its contingent elements are removed and it seems to have been selected and united in a plot". In the same direction points Caserio (3-5). He, like most contemporary theorists, suspends the difference between art and life, considering the latter as the result of a sequence of constructed stories/plots. If one starts out from a contrast between plot and story, there are two possibilities. One may assume, as the Russian Formalists and Frye (85-88) do, that life is essentially formless, and emphasize — in contrast to the story of life — the

truth of plot; or, conversely, one may argue from a mimetic standpoint like Forster (152) and Stein (1969, 19-20) and demand of the writer, in Forster's words, "to plot with the plot! Break it up, boil it down. [...] All that is pre-arranged is false" (108). Postmodern reception-theory starts out from the communication-model text with its three aspects: production, mediation, and reception. If one conceives of life as a number of prefigured plots and of human life as a continuous, dynamic "employment", then it is logical enough to differentiate three levels of employment in narrative; first, the employment as anthropological constant, i.e., in Ricoeur's terms, as human narrative activity in the life world; second, the configured coherent employment in the text; and third, a dynamic activity, i.e., employment, on the part of the reader, who interprets the text and its configurations. This means for postmodern writers that even if they reject and dissolve plot(s), they have to reckon with the fact that the reader, following the human narrative instinct, reconstitutes the plot or creates a plot-coherence by him- or herself. See for an overview Dipple.

<sup>88</sup> See Crane, who differentiates "plots of action", "plots of character", and "plots of thought".

<sup>89</sup> Barth's narrator in *Lost in the Funhouse* interrupts himself with such deliberations as: "So far there's been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*. And a long time has gone by already without anything happening; it makes a person [and the reader] wonder" (74). Barthelme, in *Snow White*, and Federman, in *Take It or Leave It*, parodying reader expectations, even insert questionnaires into their texts. This thus accentuates not only the simultaneity of story and *fabricating* the story but also the copresence of text, fabricating the text, and receiving and judging the text with questions like "Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )", "Would you like a war? Yes ( ) No ( )", "Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes ( ) No ( )" (*SW* 82); or "Have you understood up to now that Moinos dead or alive is only a symbolic figure?" and "Is it clear that the journey is a metaphor for something else?" (*ToL* n.p.) Simultaneity affects character and action. In Barth, the afflicted character cannot decide where to go, because one choice is as good as the other. Being stifled in a place or a situation, he has a "condition" that Barth ironically and playfully calls "cosmopsis" (*The End of the Road, The Sot-Weed Factor*). Billy, the protagonist in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* who has survived the fire bombing of Dresden, has become unstuck in time. Time-travel takes him from one set of time to another, all times, past, present, and future having become simultaneous, at least potentially. While in postmodern fiction actions stop or become incidental because actions aim strictly at a sequence of time and at change, and both cannot be achieved without freedom of will, events often replace actions because they are potentially multiperspectual; they come from outside, are simultaneously contingent, relationless, without logical sequence or interaction. In the strife between the extraordinary and the ordinary, crucial for Barthelme, Elkin and DeLillo, the differences are blurred and the one becomes simultaneously the other. Sameness and difference, entropy and renewal, however, stand side by side without reconciliation in Pynchon's novels.

<sup>90</sup> See also Spanos: "It is [...] no accident that the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern [...] literary imagination is the anti-detective story (and its anti-

psychoanalytical analogue), the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to 'detect' and/or psychoanalyze in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime or find the cause for the neurosis" (1972, 154).

<sup>91</sup> Eliade writes in his *The Myth of the Eternal Return*: "[T]he myth of eternal repetition [...] has the meaning of a supreme attempt toward the 'staticization' of becoming, toward annulling the irreversibility of time" (123).

<sup>92</sup> The references to Empedocles in the novel are discussed by Matanle.

<sup>93</sup> See Friedman and Humphrey.

<sup>94</sup> See the ironically treated epiphanies of Stephen Dedalus in the fourth part of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

<sup>95</sup> See Fiske: "The routine pleasures of popular culture may derive ultimately from the sense of chronological control it offers". It gives a sense of power; and power is part of the "matrix of pleasure, relevance, and empowerment" which "lies at the core of popular culture" (66) — and, one may add, not only of popular culture.

<sup>96</sup> See the chapter on mobility and immobility in Hoffmann 1978.

<sup>97</sup> See also Jameson 1992 and D. Harvey 201ff.

<sup>98</sup> Virilio, 1991 and 1988. Docherty in his essay on "The Ethics of Alterity: Postmodern Character", uses the same terms to differentiate the paradigm of the postmodern novel, i.e., "appearance versus disappearance", from that of the traditional and modern novel, "appearance versus reality".

<sup>99</sup> Tindall speaks of the "analogical embodiment" of a "complex of feeling and thought" (12-13), and Brumm differentiates a "cause-linked 'realistic' symbol" from the "transcendent or magic symbol" (363).

<sup>100</sup> Many other novels, Elkin's *The Franchiser* and Gaddis's *JR*, to name only two, show a similar tendency to expand the tenor of the symbol. They both use basic spatial configurations, either the indefinite expanse of space (Elkin) or the definite concentration of place (Gaddis) to deal with fundamental antitheses like sameness vs. difference, ideology of business vs. meaning of art and existence. Barthelme's symbolic "picture stories", as in "The Glass Mountain" and "The Balloon", exhibit the same patterns of tension between vehicle and tenor, object and meaning, except that they radicalize the tension between the two, fantasizing both to the extreme, in fact to a point where the vehicle loses its stability and the tenor yields either its articulability (the balloon) or its genuineness (the glass mountain). Irony, parody, and the comic perspective have attained here full dominance also over the symbol, without, however, destroying its operational function of stimulating not meaning but the *question* of meaning. Finally, in texts by Gass, Sukenick, Barth, and others, we reach a stage where "natural", spatial figurations like the river or the



labyrinth, or massless, “abstract”, and “artificial” formations, indeed geometric patterns — up, down, and out, the spiral, and the Moebius strip — are used as symbols that describe both the course of life and the poetics of the postmodern narrative.

<sup>101</sup> As this example demonstrates quite clearly, the terminology for the signifying activity of the text varies widely. Barth for instance uses metaphor, symbol, and emblem quite interchangeably. In fact, in postmodern times, the word “metaphor” has sometimes replaced the term “symbol”. Figurative signs like symbols that aim to hold together the meaning of two realms, a material and a spiritual one, may appear to be mere metaphors connecting signifiers with other signifiers without signifieds, if the indefiniteness of language and the gap between language and the world are considered crucial for a new orientation of categorical thinking. But signifiers always have signifieds, whatever their relation to external reality, and narrative always builds up a world, even if it is a “world within the word” (Gass). This world is situationally grounded; it establishes itself in terms of space, time, character, action/event. Words assume the character of signifiers of a material world, for instance a picture, a house, or a landscape, and their signifieds as *corporeal* entities can provide access on another level, in a secondary interpretation, to a “higher” synthesizing meaning, or to a “deeper” level of significance. Thus we should speak of symbols, not of metaphors (except in border cases, of which more later), when we analyze a secondary meaning of the signified in fiction, a thing, or a person.

<sup>102</sup> For the relationship between information theory and the arts, see Moles.

<sup>103</sup> The terms labyrinth and maze used here interchangeably have been applied to the complex works of many authors, among them Shakespeare, Sterne, Hawthorne, Melville, and Joyce; they also have been used to open situations in theory and criticism, but in most cases loosely and metaphorically. For discussion of the labyrinth as formal choice, see, among others, Senn, who lists and quotes from a number of arbitrarily chosen texts. See also Fletcher; Gutierrez 1983-83 and 1985; Hogle; Koerner; A. Martin; Hillis Miller; Redekop; R.R. Wilson.

<sup>104</sup> Kern distinguishes, as most critics do, the multicursal from the unicursal labyrinth.

<sup>105</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, a rhizomic structure is like a tangle of bulbs and tubers appearing like “rats squirming one on top of the other!” (*Rhizome* [qtd. in Eco 1984a, 81]).

<sup>106</sup> See Docherty 1983; Cixous and Cohen; and a number of statements by John Barth and other postmodern writers.

<sup>107</sup> Roland Barthes distinguishes between “real character” and “figure” (1947, 67); Tanner uses the term “figure” for Pynchon’s *V.* (1971, 164); Russell employs the term “literary figures” (1982); Lauzen speaks of a “deliberate

flattening out” of the characters in Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Gaddis (101). For W. Martin, postmodern fictional characters are “fantastic, formulaic, and metafictional creatures” that have “only a remote resemblance to people as we know them” (119); and P. Currie speaks of “flat, etiolated figures without any redeeming psychological chiaroscuro” (66). The opinions vary depending on the fact whether these figures in their anti-realistic depthlessness and surface containment, dispersal, and fragmentation seem to represent our fragmented surface-contained world or not. One of the critics who see the deconstructions of character as referring to a deconstructed world is Jameson (1992). But postmodern writers like both Barth and Sukenick also confirm the referentiality of the postmodern texts (Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion”, Sukenick 1975a). The facts that the borderlines between reality and fiction are blurred, and reality appears as a mental (linguistic) construct, however, relativizes the concept of referentiality regardless of ideological positions. David Carroll therefore turns against the theoretical validity of the term “anti-representation” (1982, 25). Critics like McCaffery (*Postmodern Fiction* xxv) and Hutcheon (1988) have noted the political relevance of postmodern fiction, though a postmodern fictionist like William Gass affirms the opposite, the non-relevance of his fiction — which again points to the paradoxicality of postmodern fiction.

<sup>108</sup> For the concept of identity, see D. J. DeLeVita; Odo Marquard and Karlheinz Stierle, eds.; Erik H. Erikson 1979 and 1980; Wylie Sypher 1962; Pütz (esp. the section “Imagination and Self-Definition” 28-60) gives a comprehensive survey of the concept of identity in literature and literary criticism.

<sup>109</sup> Bersani holds that covered, rapturous desire comes to “explode the myth of personality”, the concept of a unitary character, already in texts like *Wuthering Heights* (x, 214). Others see the unitary character shaken in modernism. Glicksberg describes character in modern texts as lacking an “essence” or “a presiding pattern of unity” (xi-xii), and D. Brown perceives in modernist texts de-unified, incoherent characters.

<sup>110</sup> Docherty maintains that surface characters can have their own special interest since the empty spaces left by the method of creating only surfaces and facts activate the participation of the reader to great extent than do the traditional characters of the “realistic” novels, whose mimetic tendency reflecting in the hierarchy of characters is dictatorial and demonstrates the author’s invading claim to authority. For Docherty what remains in “dialogue fiction” (Barthelme, Brautigan, Gaddis) that disconnects the speech acts from the character is a “series of subjectivity”, which are not masters of their language. The reader puts them together, who finally, “is only character left at play in the production of fiction” — which is of course a rather provocative overstatement of the case (1983, 40, xvi, 8). Cixous and Cohen argue just like Bersani, now in Lacanian terms, that the representational character of the traditional novel represses desire and the unconscious, controls the ways of feeling and reflection, and “patronizes meaning” (385) by the (phallic, masculine) symbolic order in which the character is placed to the debit of the imaginative (feminine) order, which is given no chance of expression. Docherty finally also calls the relation author-character-reader in the traditional novel phallic and sees in the surface-characterization of postmodern

fiction the chance to establish a fruitful connection between author and reader and “inter-subjective motivation, in whose mobility their positions can interfuse” so that finally, with the arrival of the dispersed character, the “destruction [...] of the stable familial home” can take place and make room for “the possibility of a feminist writing” (1983, 239), for liberty and multiplicity, a free interplay. In the spirit of the counterculture, Tatham speaks of the characters in postmodern texts as the “selves infolding and unfolding in dazzling perspectives, leaving the merest trace of a script” (138). The reader is asked to abandon the “rigid, restricted notion that you must be a single, cohesive, unified persona” and to “tune in” with “past and future selves” (145) (A. Fokkema 61-62). Russell has remarked that this abandonment of fixed character/ego structures was the real attack on bourgeois society more effective than any active rebellion. Of course there are negative reactions to mere surface character (1982). Graff complains about the “[d]issolution of ego boundaries” (57). There is obviously the danger that one ideology (of the unified, autonomous self) is replaced by another one (of the dispersed, multiple, liberated self).

<sup>111</sup> The question of morality has been transferred by modernism and postmodernism from the character to the aesthetic quality of the text and its truth value. In Elkin’s words: “Of course any work of art which is genuine is by necessity and definition moral” (LeClair and McCaffery 111); or in Sukenick’s phrase, referring to Flaubert: “‘The only obligation of the writer is the morality of the right sensation.’ That’s quite true” (LeClair and McCaffery 288); or, in Gass’s terms (who radicalizes modernist ambiguity): “I don’t know, most of the time, what I believe. Indeed, as a fiction writer I find it convenient [...] just to move into a realm where everything is held in suspension”; and “it would be a grievous disappointment if we ever solved anything” (LeClair and McCaffery 22, 30). Hawkes says that fiction “should be an act of rebellion against all the constraints of the conventional pedestrian mentality around us. Surely it should destroy conventional morality” (Bellamy 1974, 108).

<sup>112</sup> See also the study of Hochman, who sees an “underlying unity” (98) of character in psychological conflict and writes that “characters in literature have more in common with people in life than contemporary discourse suggests” (7), that language furnishes “the image of a character [...] before we become conscious of the language that generates the character” (41). For him, “characters are utterly embedded in texts and utterly detachable from them” (74). See also Swinden.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Humphrey; Friedman; Alter; Cohn.

<sup>114</sup> The late-modern writer Bellow, though he (as also Malamud or Ellison) attempts to adhere to a concept of personality, notes: “The person, the character, as we knew him in the plays of Sophocles, or Shakespeare, Cervantes, Fielding and Balzac, has gone from us. Instead of a unitary character with his unitary character, his ambitions, his passions, his soul, his fate, we find in modern literature an oddly dispersed, ragged, mingled, broken, amorphous creature whose outlines are everywhere, whose being is bathed in mind as the tissues are bathed in blood, and who is impossible to circumscribe in a scheme of time” (29).

<sup>115</sup> It is, however, not only the Marxist critic who has noted and indicated the dispersion of the self in postmodern times. See, for instance, Laing 1965 and 1967; and Lasch 1979 and 1984. Sypher has analyzed the *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Greimas 1966 and 1983; see for similar, plot-oriented positions Todorov 1969; Barthes and Duisit. Chatman, ch. 3, sticks to the opposition of deep and surface level but sees characters already at the deep level of narrative. See also Hamon 1983, who avoids the concept of deep structure but retains the notion of actants. Todorov, in a revision of his initial position, proposed a differentiation between apsychological and psychological texts, thus however, only returning to a distinction of action/plot-and character-dominated texts.

<sup>117</sup> For Jean Ricardou even the study of character and time and space in narrative is suspect because it would be the result of “referential ideology” and strengthens the “realistic illusion” and traditional criticism.

<sup>118</sup> See also Johnston. I am indebted to his argument.

<sup>119</sup> See also the interview with Gass in LeClair and McCaffery: “A character for me is a linguistic location in a book toward which a great part of the rest of the text stands as a modifier. Just as the subject of a sentence, say, is modified by the predicate, so frequently some character” (28).

<sup>120</sup> One of the prominent structuralists, Emile Benveniste, writes that “[i]t is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being (224). Yet he sees himself the limits of formalism and the danger of a purely linguistic approach. He deplores that “linguistic analysis, in order to be scientific, should ignore meaning and apply it solely to the definition and distribution of elements. The conditions of rigor imposed on the procedure require that that elusive, subjective and unclassifiable element which is meaning or sense be eliminated [...] It is to be feared that if this method becomes general, linguistics may never be able to join any of the other sciences of man or culture” (10).

<sup>121</sup> See for detailed overview A. Fokkema, who uses a “semiotic” approach, endeavoring to combine a representational and textual view of character, and considers character to be “a cumulative sign” (16-17) in the text with a referential function, which can be analyzed in terms of a number of codes like the logical, the biological, the psychological, the social codes or the physical code. I am indebted to his lucid analysis of positions in the representation of character in the novel and use some of the material quoted in the book for my own argument.

<sup>122</sup> Not much has been written about emotion in postmodernism in general and in postmodern fiction specifically. See Hoffmann and Hornung 1997, and my essay in the collection. On the theories of emotion see also Boruah.

<sup>123</sup> See his section on “Belief and desire”, 228-39.

<sup>124</sup> Into the emptiness left by deconstructed beliefs enter desire and obsessions.

<sup>125</sup> Textual dogmatism of course denies the possibility of perception. Derrida writes: "As to perception, I should say at once I organized it as a necessary conservation. I was extremely conservative. Now I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or of a given origination from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning independently from language, from the system of reference [...] I don't believe that there is any perception" (1988b, 122).

<sup>126</sup> I am indebted to Iser's analysis of Beckett's text.

<sup>127</sup> Jean Ricardou who is most vehemently opposed to a "realistic" or representational reading of the New Novel, which only would serve the "ruling ideology" and the interests of the ruling class and the state, sees two stages of the New Novel, also in Robbe-Grillet's fiction, which would coexist with the two phases of criticism: "The one, which has been called the *First New Novel*, operates a *tendentious division in the diegetic Unity* and inaugurates in this way a period of *contestation* however, for better or for worse, it manages to safeguard a certain unity. The other phase [...] the *New New Novel*, dramatizes the impossible *assembly of a diegetic Plurality* and inaugurates in this way a *subversive period*" (qtd. in Carroll 1982, 201, from *Le Nouveau Roman*). See also Carroll for an analysis of the critical evaluation of Robbe-Grillet and the New Novel, under the heading "Structuralism and Fiction: The Negation, Displacement, and Return of the Subject" (1982, 14-26).

<sup>128</sup> Federman writes: "I myself have tried to fragment language in my fiction though typography [...] indeed, my interest in typography is as much an interest in exploring the way in which syntax can be distorted and manipulated as it is in the shape or design of words on the page)". He compares himself with Sukenick: "my typographical experiments remain somewhat artificial, whereas Sukenick's linguistic distortions seem very natural" (LeClair and McCaffery 149). And Barth speaks of Hawkes's "outrageous situations and unforgettable scenes refracted through a lense of rhetoric that transfigures them" (LeClair and McCaffery 10). Kohler in Gass's *The Tunnel* speaks of "that fractured plurality of egos" (43).

<sup>129</sup> Robbe-Grillet wrote in *For a New Novel*: what the author "asks of him [the reader] is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn the work and the world — and thus to learn to invent his own life" (156).

<sup>130</sup> For these phenomena, Brooke-Rose employs the "rhetorical" concept of "stylization" (1981, 373-75).

<sup>131</sup> In his essay "The New Tradition in Fiction", Sukenick notes, quoting John Ashberry, that there are "two ways of going about things: one is to put everything in and the other is to leave everything out" (42). In an interview, Elkin

speaks of Fitzgerald's "putter-inners" and "taker-outers", defining his own narrative strategy with the remark: "I don't believe that less is more. I believe that *more* is more. [...] There's a famous exchange between Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe in which Fitzgerald criticizes Wolfe for one of his novels [...] I'd rather be a putter-inner than a taker-outer" (LeClair and McCaffery 109).

<sup>132</sup> Ezra Pound used the term "image" for the same demand to express emotion and thought indirectly, and for him "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (1913, 203). Hemingway, finally, expresses himself in quite similar terms; what he wants to relate is "the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion" (305).

<sup>133</sup> In my list of the qualities of actions, some of the terms (for instance, 'false self') are taken from Laing 1965, *passim*.

<sup>134</sup> E. M. Forster rejects Aristotle's position and notes that we are not interested in the imitation of an action, but rather in the "secret life which each of us lives privately" (85).

<sup>135</sup> See, for instance, Kaulbach; Ryle; Parsons; E. Goffman 1974; Lenk; Care and Landesman; Brand.

<sup>136</sup> See for entropy *The Crying of Lot 49*: Abernethy; Lyons and Franklin; Mangel; Plater 1-63, 220-24; Schmitz 112-25; Slade 1974; Young 69-77; Simberloff.

<sup>137</sup> On Oedipa as a quester, see Cowart; and Brugière.

<sup>138</sup> Hierophany is the term created by Mircea Eliade: "From the most elementary hierophany ... to the supreme hierophany ... there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act — the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (qtd. in Mendelson 122).

<sup>139</sup> LeClair borrows the term from Gregory Bateson.

<sup>140</sup> We will here concentrate on the *imagination*, or rather, on the activity of the imagination, without probing into its origin or ground. The manifestation of the imaginative activity, the imaginary, takes a variety of shapes depending on its stimulants. The imagination meets the needs of different historical contexts; it fulfills equally the requirements of the finite mind and the specific situation it relates to, both of which condition the shaping of the imaginary in its particular form. The conceptualization of the imagination as faculty and activity has of course its own history that can here only be touched upon. "Initially the imagination had occupied a lower rank, not least because, through its link to the senses and memory it was present as a latent subversion, if not an actual defiance, of a reason-dominated hierarchy. But in the sixteenth century, imagination began its advance, and toward

the end of the eighteenth, it gained prominence thanks to its multiple uses" (Iser 1993, 181). But even then the "conceptual definitions" of this "ever-expanding faculty" "melt away into metaphors that unravel this 'power' into a series of images for an activity that for the most part cannot be conceptualized" (182). There are several reasons why the imagination has so seldom been scrutinized by philosophy the way other faculties of the mind were. For one, the imagination transcends rationality and retains traces at least of mystery and the beyond. Many (rational and empiricist) systems of thought would rather do without a concept of imagination that could not easily be categorized. Furthermore, "the very availability and self-ensured success of imaginative experience hindered rather than helped its comprehension in theoretical claims". And third, as Sartre notes, there is a close relation between the creative function of the imagination and its image-forming power, while there is an absence of images in philosophical discourse. Philosophers are therefore inclined to conceive of philosophical thinking as image-free, which excludes imagination from their attention. Many have followed the lead of Plato, who stated that "a theoretical inquiry no more employs images than does a factual investigation", until, in a turn of the tide, Heidegger would complain that philosophical thinking is "charmless and image-poor" (qtd. in Casey x).

<sup>141</sup> See Coleridge's much-quoted "definition": "The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space. [...] equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association" (1958, 202). For the positive reception of romantic ideas of the imagination in modern literature, see Riquelme.

<sup>142</sup> See Kearney 1988, 261-65. I am indebted to Kearney's discussion of the postmodern imagination and in part follow him.

<sup>143</sup> Yet speculation is not all. The postmodern imagination has at least two more levels, which in fact connect it to modernist ideas. First, one might quote Kristeva's "melancholic imagination", which marks the rifts and ruptures in the self that appear to lie at the ground of the postmodern fiction, just as violence and paranoia do, even if they are playfully relativized. And second, the belief in the transposing power of the imagination to continue to create what Roland Barthes calls "jouissance", or the modernists the moment of "revelation" or "being" or "vision", now, however resulting from language as the imaginary. Gass writes in *On Being Blue*: "[S]uch are the sentences we should like to love — the ones which love us and themselves as well — incestuous sentences — sentences which make an

imaginary speaker speak the imagination loudly to the reading eye; that have a kind of orality transmogrified: not the tongue touching the genital tip, but the idea of the tongue, the thought of the tongue [...] ah! after exclamations, groans, with order gone, disorder on the way, we subside through sentences like these, the risk of senselessness like this, to float like leaves on the restful surface of that world of words to come” (57-58). Furthermore, through all the playful, melancholy, or ecstatic experiences of the surface of the world or of the words, shimmers the void that the play of the imagination and its words seeks to cover and to discover.

<sup>144</sup> See Poenicke, *Dark Sublime*. Weiskel, a little one-sidedly, calls Kant’s sublime the negative version of the sublime, which as such designates the alienation of the subject, the deconstruction of the self in the sublime experience (44-45).

<sup>145</sup> The sublime is transferred to the human achievement in technology, which attains an awe-inspiring sublime dimension — though in fact the sublime’s claim for transcendence, for a transpersonal and transhuman horizon, should make “a humanistic sublime [...] an oxymoron” (Weiskel 3). For Perry Miller, however, “the TRUE SUBLIME behind the obvious SUBLIME of the immense pageant of Technology [...] is MIND itself”. The myth of the American dream can be seen in the “general [American] conviction that ultimate Sublimity in the creation is human Mind (especially when dependent entirely on sense impression), because it can demonstrably cope with infinite expanse of Nature, can keep pace with further and further discoveries, can follow the dynamic flow” (321). The urban vista, with the grandeur of its skyscrapers, the overpowering spectacle of the rocket launching, or the moon landing would then be sublime signatures of the *mind*, inspiring the viewer with both terror and delight and stimulating the flow of high energy and empowering self-reliance. The fact that the space formerly occupied by universal reason is now a void ironizes and comicalizes the human belief in the all-mightiness of the mind.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Friedrich Schiller: “Thus the sublime affords us an egress from the sensuous world in which the beautiful would gladly hold us forever captive. Not gradually (for there is no transition from dependence to freedom), but suddenly and with a shock it tears the independent spirit out of the net in which a refined sensuousness has entailed it, and which binds all the more tightly the more gossamer its weave” (201-2).

<sup>147</sup> What endears the imagination to the postmodern mind is the idea of freedom, often called *spontaneity*. What is important is not so much the object and the content of the artefact, the achievement of something “new”, but rather the productive *art-process*, the creativity without restraint. Kant remarks: “Insofar as imagination is spontaneity, I sometimes also entitle it the *productive* imagination” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, qtd. in Warnock 15), and for Sartre “imagining consciousness [...] presents itself to itself as an imagining consciousness, that is *as a spontaneity*” (qtd. in Casey 67). According to Kant, a spontaneous act is a process that “begins on itself”, and spontaneity is “the mind’s power of producing representations from itself” (qtd. in Warnock 22). Of course, the concept of spontaneity has changed and has lost its obvious link to the causal processes of consciousness. The spontaneously imagining act does not succumb to any



questioning or comparison to other activities of consciousness. Spontaneity of the creative act is corroborated by the *self-evidence* of what it achieves. The imaginary experience (and its representation) is incorrigible, non-verifiable, and non-falsifiable. The mode of imaging is now *possibility*, not actuality, necessity, or logical truth; it is always partial, multiform, and incomplete. The limitlessness of the imagination is transferred into the unending possibilities of storytelling, which finds a new basis in a narrative “metaphysics of multiplicity” (Schulz viii). No longer society and its moral laws, but rather life and its energies appear to be the frame of reference. The human mind sees its principle of imaginative creativity, the supposing of possibilities, as the correlative of the activities of the *universe*, in which “possibilizing” and change seem the only certainties, and the mind is willing to accept a state of uncertainty and indefiniteness (which includes infinity) as the positive world principle of order. It is not the Kantian kind of order that the imagination serves but still an idea of order, the postmodern idea of order that includes chaos. Kant’s idea of the “free play” of imagination is taken literally and made absolute. Following this direction, Bateson can thus see “Mind” in its fluidity as the dominant quality of the cosmos, and the imagination as part of and the confirmer of this universal Mind. This is, of course, only the theoretical view. In practice, the various (contrasting) functions of the imagination and its ambivalent relationship with reflection, (existential) feeling, and meaning, make for tension and strife, on which we will focus in the following paragraphs.

<sup>148</sup> The terms “satire” and “satiric” here are used without differentiation, since satire is commonly understood as the term for the genre as well as the mode of writing.

<sup>149</sup> John Tilton, in his study of Anthony Burgess, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut, has noted that “cosmic satire” can transcend topical social satire. His phrasing in speaking of “a profound satiric vision, a vision, ultimately tragic in its implications” shows, however, the all-too frequent medley of terms, which has no heuristic value (*Cosmic Satire* 18).

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